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Guilty— OF LOVE

by VAL NEWELL

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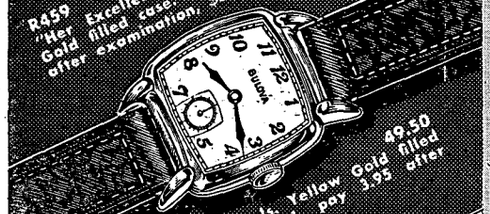

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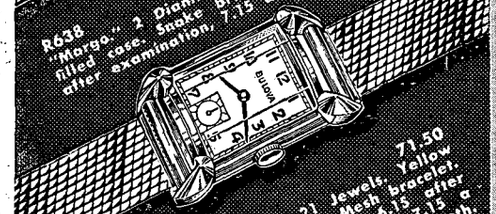

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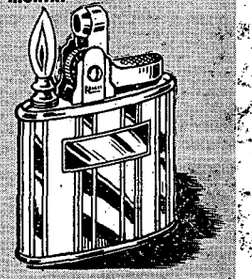

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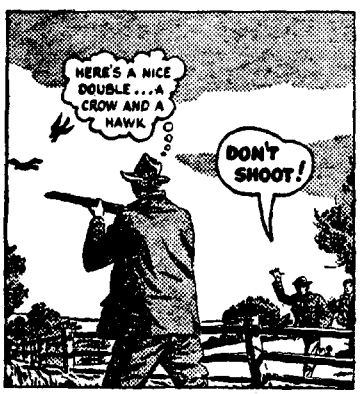

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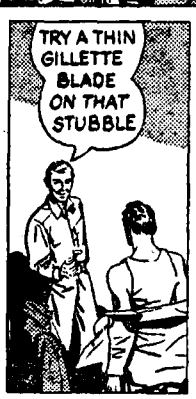

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Guilty—Of Love

By

Val Newell

Ryan stood there, glaring at them. "Take Paul's offer, Roslyn," he said. "It's the best he's made so far."

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When a girl's husband confesses to her that he's killed another woman, what is she to do?

THEY SAT by the window of the quiet little upstairs tea room. Across the Plaza, the county courthouse gleamed whitely in the mid-morning sunlight. The sky was a heavenly blue, and the trees in the park were washed sparkling clean by last night's rain.

The waiter poured Roslyn's fifth cup

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of coffee. Across the table, Paul was snubbing out another cigarette in an ashtray already heaped full of stubs. The waiter took the ashtray and brought a fresh one.

When he was gone again, Paul said, his gaze traveling involuntarily to the courthouse, "They are going to acquit him."

"Yes," Roslyn agreed. It was almost too husky to be audible.

Paul took another cigarette and tapped it restlessly on the tabletop. Roslyn said, "You're smoking too much."

He lighted it without answering. She saw his gray eyes flick toward the window as if drawn by a magnet. The clock in the courthouse tower said seven minutes after eleven. High above it, against the blue sky, the red and white stripes of the flag fluttered gayly, almost gaudily, she thought, but she was tired. Deathly tired of watching that flag flutter in the breeze. And the white state flag under it—the state that Paul had been fighting, over there in that court room.

She asked, "Shouldn't you be there now?"

"Gregory can take care of it. There's nothing more I can do."

"I ought to be there when—" Her words slowed. The jury had already been out twenty-two hours.

"He doesn't want you there."

"That's silly."

"It's not silly at all. There will be a terrific jam of reporters and photographers and just people." And then he added slowly, "If he's acquitted, that is."

If he was acquitted.

She stared blindly at the flag, so she would not have to meet Paul's steady gray eyes. She had never said it aloud, not even once. She had never dared even think it. But now suddenly she wondered what Paul, who was Ryan's lawyer, really thought behind that neat legal facade of his.

She said harshly, as if she expected to be contradicted, "They can't convict an innocent man."

His smile was tired. "They won't convict him, not if I can stop them, they won't. An interesting question is whether I've stopped them."

"You did your best, Paul."

He looked at her. His eyes were very steady. They had kept up a smooth, united front—Ryan and Paul, Roslyn, her parents, their friends. But what she saw in his eyes now made her hands go clammy.

He said, "My best isn't good enough in this case, whether they acquit him or not."

She whispered, "Paul, please—"

"He's guilty as hell. You know it, Roslyn."

"Stop it, Paul!"

"Why go on kidding yourself? He killed her."

She did not answer, but she was very white. Because now it was said. It was in words, the very words she had been shoving frantically out of her mind for six long, despairing months.

And it was Ryan Gifford's own lawyer who had said it.

Ryan, she thought miserably. Dark, tender, mocking Ryan, with that slightly saturnine look that had counted so heavily against him for these past months. Ryan, whose seething emotions lay hidden behind a smiling suavity that was almost taciturn.

SHE CLOSED her eyes, trying not to hear Paul's words echo hollowly through the emptiness of her heart. He's guilty. He killed her. He's guilty.

I am married to a murderer.

She sat there, still as death, trying to blot him out and the thing he had said.

Paul said, "Look, Roslyn, I was his best friend. We were in prep school together, in college together, even in the war together. I know him better than you do, better, I think, than his own parents

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could have. Better than any other person in the world. And he's capable of it. Believe me, it all adds up."

"He's not—" The words were faraway, beyond her groping despair. Because at least part of what he had said was true. It did all add up, with a convincingness that had rocked her when she heard for the first time, in court, things she had never known about Ryan.

"Just because he's a lanky, quiet guy, don't think he can't get passionate about things. He went completely overboard for that night-club baby. He knew what she was, but she was like a drug. And then you came along, sweet and decent, and got him away from her without ever knowing there was another woman."

Her lashes lifted slowly. Tears glittered there, but she was not crying. She said, "I know all that. But he didn't do it. Paul, he didn't do it!"

"The morning of your wedding, she sent for him. And he went because he didn't dare not to."

"He went to get some letters and things—pictures, things like that. She phoned him to come and get them so everything would be all settled. And he did."

He said gently, "You're kidding no one but yourself, honey. It was a blackmail deal, pure and simple. If he married you, she would turn the stuff over to you, and he knew you couldn't take it. So he killed her."

Roslyn said with a low, tense fury, "Will you stop talking like this? You're his lawyer. You're his best friend. If he can't depend on you, what is he going to do?"

"If I had known then what I know now, I never would have been his lawyer."

She sat still. "What you know?"

"I'm in love with you, Roslyn."

She did not move. And then a small shiver of relief swept through her. Paying scant heed to his words, she realized only that he did not, after all, know anything of importance—anything that would have made an honest lawyer refuse to take the case.

He was only guessing that Ryan might be guilty. He was only wondering, as sometime during the past six months she had wondered, only to shove away the doubts as disloyal.

She hadn't doubted, not at first. She had believed in him with the same passionate intensity as she had fallen in love with him. It had all happened too swiftly—meeting him, falling in love with him, marrying him. It was wrong. A girl should not marry like that; she should wait a little.

Wrong? What was wrong about it? I loved him the minute I saw him, and Ryan felt the same way. I still love him. I do, I do!

It had been magic from the beginning. Like the way they first met—five feet under water. Someone had taken her to the Tennis Club, out on the lake; and coming up from a high dive she had come face to face and almost collided with Ryan. It was like a moment from a fantasy, with the shimmering green water all about them and Ryan's brown body making her think of some sort of sea-god that had come up from the depths.

And there had been that moment at the reception, after the wedding. One small moment out of an eternity, with Ryan's hand covering hers as they cut the first slice of the fairy-tower wedding cake. Roslyn had glanced up, laughing, but Ryan's dark eyes, locking with hers, had not been laughing at all. And the people and voices had all faded away until there was no one left in the world but one man, and one woman.

It was less than ten minutes later that the police came.

She pushed it away, trying not to remember what followed. It was all over, a gap in their lives that they would

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ignore. Ryan would be acquitted, she was almost positive of it. Even Paul thought so. Because the district attorney had not been able to prove beyond all doubt that Ryan had killed that night-club singer, Mona Mayo. So he would come home and—

And then what?

That was what Paul was asking her. "What are you going to do?"

"Do?" she repeated huskily, stalling. Because she did not know. Oh, it was simple enough. She was married, and Ryan would be acquitted. There would be a great deal of *Hail, the conquering hero!* But afterward?

SHE COULD not force her thoughts into it. There was an apartment, newly furnished and leased for three years, waiting for them. At first she had wanted to move into it even without Ryan, but both of her parents objected so strenuously, she hesitated. And when Ryan asked her not to, she agreed to wait.

If he were freed, she would have to wait no longer. A taxicab could take them straight from that courthouse across the Plaza to the apartment. And in Ryan's arms she would realize the nightmare was really over. She would know there had been nothing, ever, for her to wonder about.

Wouldn't she?

Paul's hand touched hers lightly. "That means a lot to you, doesn't it?"

She looked down. His fingers were gently turning her wedding ring, until a shaft of morning sun caught in the diamonds to glitter radiantly.

"Shouldn't it?" Her lips felt wooden.

"Yes. It should. But you know, of course, that you can never ask him if he did it? If he didn't, he'd be furious. If he did—"

He would lie, she thought with a clear detachment. Just as he lied to me once about knowing Mona Mayo only casually, before it came out in court that he knew her far too well.

Paul asked, "After this whole trial, you're not still naive enough to believe everything he tells you, are you?"

Staring at him blindly, she said nothing. He smiled faintly.

"You know, Roslyn, you are fantastically loyal."

She said, "You're not."

"Even the best of friendships can eventually reach a breaking point. This is it. I got him out of the worst mess in his life. At least, I hope he's out of it, because I did my damndest. I went into this thing blind, believing in him. I couldn't quit in the middle. Neither could you. But this isn't the middle any more, Roslyn. It's the end."

She whispered, "You think he did it."

"So do you."

"No—"

"Yes!" He stopped her so swiftly, she hardly had time to say it. "Roslyn, don't you realize what you're doing? You're not his wife in fact, but you will be. And one day you'll realize, clear and cold, that you are married to a man who killed a woman. A woman just like you, Roslyn. Somebody he loved once. You'll know you are living with a criminal."

She stumbled blindly to her feet. "I—I'd better go over there."

His fingers closed over her wrist, holding her fast while he rose.

"He doesn't want you there when they deliver the verdict. I told you that. Get out of this. For God's sake, get out of it while you can!"

Tearing her wrist free, she got away from him, walking fast, a slim girl in a black suit and five stone martens that slipped off one shoulder. She wore an orchid because, a long time ago, Ryan had left an order at a florist to send her an orchid every day.

"Taxi, Mrs. Gifford?"

Everyone knew who she was. Mrs.

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Ryan Gifford, the city's most photographed wife. All of her pictures turned out well, even if the flash gun went off when she was crying. For half a year, she had been more conspicuous than any visiting movie star. Strangers accosted her on streets. Women phoned so often, her father had changed his number to one unlisted. Men wrote her letters.

Even the taxicab drivers knew her, she thought bitterly, getting in.

"Kinda hard, waiting," he said cheerfully, slamming the door. "Don't blame you for ducking out of court. I got the radio on; they'll give a news flash if anything happens."

He swung around the Plaza slowly, his gaze wandering off toward the courthouse as if he expected people to come swarming out any instant. "Any particular place you want to go?"

"Home," she said huskily.

He knew where that was. Everyone in town apparently did. Home, the house that rambled along a picturesque hillside drive, where her father was a doctor and her mother headed a charity league. Home—where the reception had been, before the police broke it up by carrying off the bridegroom.

The cabby asked, very offhand, "Where'd you say you wanted to go?"

Home. That was what she had said. But an obscure little taxicab driver had put an entirely new meaning in the word that blotted out, at least for the moment, everything Paul had said to her.

She said slowly, "It's number seven, Mira Vista Terrace. Up on the hill."

IT WAS a high hill. Mira Vista Terrace was a short street with a circle at the end. It was lined with sleek, glittering apartment houses, expensive new buildings with switchboards and elevators and maid service and breath-taking marine views.

The apartment was sleek and glittering, too. There was a fireplace set in an entire wall of black mirror. There was another wall that was nearly all window, with a long low plant box beneath it. There was a dining alcove that was up two steps. And everywhere there was lots of ice blue, touches of cherry red. Beyond the windows there was a deck, with blue and white furniture, and greenery planted in tubs.

Mr. and Mrs. Ryan Gifford—at home, she thought bitterly. Restlessly she moved about the living room, watching the shadows of the two formal little trees steal off the deck to fall into space. She waited.

He had no way of knowing she was here, but would assume her to be with her parents. He would go there first, if they acquitted him. What if they did not?

She walked over to the radio and then walked away again. She sat on the sofa, then got up to walk to the window. She went back to the sofa and flung herself down, burying her face in her arms.

She was in love with him. Maybe Paul was right. Maybe he had killed Mona Mayo. But she loved him. Good or bad, she loved him.

What does a girl do when the one man in her life is so no-good it takes twelve men to decide whether he ought to be jailed for life?

Roslyn lay there, wishing she had the moral courage to get up and walk out, as Paul wanted her to, as her parents, though they had never said so, wanted her to.

She heard a key in the door.

She went utterly still, unable to move. Face down on the sofa, she might have been asleep. But she wasn't. She knew when the door closed, knew when he saw her there, knew when, watching her, he lighted a cigarette without moving toward her.

Ryan. Wonderful, exciting, still-waters-run-deep Ryan, who had just been acquitted of killing the woman he had not

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wanted Roslyn to know anything about.

She turned her head slowly to look at him. Just her head. Her honey hair lay rumpled against her arms and there was a wide, waiting stillness in the bright blue of her eyes.

"Hello," she whispered.

"Hello," Ryan said with a casual sort of quietness.

Neither of them moved. Neither of them said anything. And it was queerly as if each was waiting for the other to make the next move.

Roslyn sat up and pushed her fingers through her tangled hair. She had taken off her suit jacket, and the blouse she wore was white and sheer and ruffled. Still black eyes watched her until a sudden strange embarrassment swept through her.

"I thought that—I just thought maybe it would be better without a lot of people—" She stopped helplessly.

"Sure," he said. Just that. Nothing more.

She saw a wispy blue trail of smoke slither through the room toward her. She whispered, "Aren't you going to say anything?"

WITH A deadly accuracy he flipped the cigarette into the fireplace, ten feet away. Then he walked over and, taking her hands, drew her to her feet.

"It's all been said," he told her softly. "A million times over and over again."

His arms closed around her. She saw the tender sweep of his mouth, and her heart shook. Six months was too long. A girl forgot what it was like to have a man hold her close. And the haunting memory of a kiss could never hold this pagan ecstasy.

She was crying a little. "Ryan— Oh, Ryan—"

"I love you," he said. "Just in case you've forgotten, or just in case you've listened to too many of those damned overflowing words, I love you."

"I know." She was clinging to him recklessly. "Darling, I know."

His mouth found hers. There was a heady abandon to it, a hungry passion that would not be satisfied. She surrendered, entranced, until he said against her lips, "Now go ahead and give me the devil."

"Why?"

"I lied, I cheated, I two-timed you."

"Oh, Ryan," she said, crying a little, "what does it matter, now?"

"It matters plenty. When you get around to using your head—"

"I don't want to use my head," she whispered, her fingers ruffling the crisp short hair at the back of his neck.

He kissed her again. It lasted a long time. But not long enough. Because nowhere in all eternity was there time enough to catch up on what they had lost.

His fingers brushed her cheek lightly, sweeping away a tear. "Stop it."

"I love you."

"You shouldn't. My legal pal tells me I am an unutterable heel."

"Oh, Paul!" she murmured scornfully.

"Darling, it's true. You know it is."

She stood completely still, her heart going cold. "What is?"

"The only decent thing you could say about me is that I didn't know she had a husband. When they sprang that on me, I was floored. I knew she was no good, but I didn't know she was married."

"All right," Roslyn said. "So you are a heel. So what?"

"The night I asked you to marry me—remember it? I gave you an engagement ring and took you home the long way around. You wore a kind of perfume that was like lilacs in the rain. Clean and sweet and so damned decent I wanted to crawl at your feet. So after I took you home, I went to see her."

She was white, but she smiled. Somehow, she smiled. "Did you?"

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"I told her I was going to marry you. And she laughed at me. She stood there looking beautiful and bad, and laughed until I—"

Until I wanted to kill her, Roslyn's mind finished with a terrible clarity. But he hadn't killed her. Because that was six weeks before their wedding day.

"I tried to remember the lilacs in the rain," he said, "but you'd have to have seen Mona to understand why I couldn't."

Once she had seen Mona. Just once. They had gone to the theater one night and afterward had wandered around to a few night-clubs. She remembered later that Ryan had objected to going to the Bal Tabarin. But the others in the party had insisted, so they had gone anyway.

Mona had sung a naughty little number that was amusing, but that one did not care to remember afterward. And Ryan had sat there pale and still, never looking at Mona once. Roslyn had remembered that later, too.

So she knew why Ryan hadn't been able to cling to anything so evanescent as the memory of lilac perfume, with green-eyed Mona standing there laughing at his threat to be rid of her.

Ryan's fingers were gentle on her cheeks. "If you're going to cry, how can I tell you? You have to know, Roslyn. A lot of the things they said at the trial were true."

A lot of them. But which ones?

He went on, "Because I lied to you about it, you're never going to know, are you, when I may be lying again? Even promises can be lies."

He was not, she realized, telling her the one thing she wanted to know. The thing that above all was important. Either he had done it and thought she knew, or he was innocent, without dreaming of her suspicions.

Or had he done it, and did not want her to know?

She said huskily, "Why are you telling me this, Ryan? Don't you know that if you chose to tell me lies, I'd probably believe them?"

"Yes," he said. "I know it."

"Then why?"

He looked down at her. There was a small silence. She felt his arms go lax, then draw away from her.

IT SEEMED to take him a long time to get a match and a cigarette together. She saw his gaze sweep the room—the fireplace in the black mirror wall, the incredibly blue harbor and matching blue sky, tinged now with pink sunset clouds, visible through the bank of windows.

His mouth twisted slightly.

"Our little bridal nest. Six months, Roslyn, and it hasn't occurred to you yet that I handed you a rotten deal? How simple can you get?"

She was white. "All right. So I'm simple. And you're rotten. And maybe I feel the same way about you that you felt about Mona. Maybe I don't care. Maybe I just—just love you any old way you come."

He stared at her. Two seconds, ten seconds—they ticked by endlessly, but he did not move. And after awhile she realized he was not seeing her at all. He was gone off somewhere—maybe back to a place where long ago a green-eyed girl had stood laughing.

He said, after a long time, "All right. If that's the way you want it."

Her fingers curved tensely into her fists. "Is there any other way you've had in mind?" she asked, and forgot to breathe.

The dark brilliance of his eyes held hers for only the smallest fraction of time. Then he looked out at the pink clouds that were turning rosy. Walking over to the window, he stood there, his hands rammed in his pockets.

"Not particularly. Why don't we call in the gang, have a housewarming? That

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will make it final enough, won't it? Everyone in town will know that your standing by me wasn't just a publicity gag to influence the jury."

She stared numbly as he turned toward the telephone. He couldn't possibly have thought that was what she meant. She had said—what was it she had said? That she loved him. All the words she had uttered added up to that one thing.

And he had called it a gag.

A long time ago, years ago, it seemed now, they had planned a honeymoon in Honolulu. They had packed their things, but had planned to spend two days in this apartment before they left. That was why they had brought their luggage here. And afterward, Roslyn had flatly refused to take it back home. She had hung everything in the closets, waiting for a day like today to happen.

So she had something to wear tonight, without going back to her father's house. There was an ivory chiffon, for instance. Strapless, it was, with miles of tiny pinpleats that fluttered when she walked.

When Ryan saw it, he sent out for ivory camellias to wear in her hair. Camellias. Not orchids. So she knew the orchid-a-day order had been just a gag that need not be continued now that he was free.

She pinned them in her hair with fingers that trembled, wanting to rip them apart. But she couldn't. The door bell was ringing. The first guests were arriving.

Ryan had phoned Paul's sister, Sophie, a bright young thing who knew everybody. Sophie loved parties, and had certainly done a wonderful job of bringing everybody out, including her brother. All their friends were there, or almost all. Roslyn smiled blindly and refused to think of the few who had deliberately stayed away.

It was a gay party. There was laughter and fun. Everyone seemed sincerely glad to see Ryan again. They wanted to know if they were still planning their trip.

"Not Honolulu," he said. "Maybe Guatemala. Maybe Timbuktu. Any place but Honolulu."

And Roslyn wondered if perhaps, that last terrible morning, Mona had said something to him about Honolulu, something that was a taunt or an invitation, something that forever would make him think of Mona whenever he thought of Honolulu.

Mona. Wherever she turned, whatever she did, there was always Mona. It seemed fantastic that a dead woman could wreck her life, but it was happening. A long time ago, she had been a girl innocently in love and planning a honeymoon. But now there was Mona. Dead, devilish and taunting, there was Mona.

Ryan, whether he knew it or not, was still in love with the woman. If by some miracle, Mona could walk into this room right now, everyone else would fade out of his awareness as if they were nonexistent.

Even Roslyn.

BY MIDNIGHT, the place was stuffy. By one, a few people were high. Roslyn noticed because she was cold sober. So was Ryan. He lifted one eyebrow at her and she smiled back, but she thought sickly, When a man gets high, he starts talking. Ryan will never put himself in a position where he might say anything he hasn't deliberately chosen to say.

A hot, senseless rage went through her. If only he would talk, tell her the truth! Any truth was better than this uncertainty, wasn't it?

Still, it hadn't been a very good idea for him to tell her about Mona. Before, she had been able to shove the thought of Mona away. She was a name, an unreality, just a girl he had known once. All the things they tried to prove about Ryan and Mona were just empty words. But he had changed that.

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Pushing open the door, she went out onto the deck. Soft light from the living room flooded through the windows, revealing a couple who stood at the railing to watch the glitter of lights, leaving shadowed the couple who stood back in a corner.

With a cool gentle breeze against her cheeks, Roslyn watched the reflections of the city suburbs shimmer against the dark mirror of the harbor. She stood there for a long time.

"Roslyn."

She did not turn. "Yes, Paul?"

Both couples had gone inside.

He said, "So you are going through with it."

"Yes," she whispered.

"You're out of your mind. The guy's got you under a spell."

A spell? Maybe that was true. A dark enchantment that held her to him even while he taunted her.

As Mona had taunted him.

Paul's hand was under her chin, tipping it up gently. She saw the dark shadows across his eyes and the bright silver that the moon made of his fair hair.

"Roslyn, you know that he did it. He killed her, so you would never know about him."

She stood motionless for a long time. Someone had the phonograph on. The music had a gay lilt. She heard, as if faraway and unreal, a burst of laughter. A wayward breeze caught in her soft amber hair, fluffing it.

"Yes," she said. "I know he did, Paul."

"But you're going to stay?"

"Yes."

"I could take you home to your parents. I'm a lawyer. I think I could run an annulment through in less time than you could wink."

Numbly she shook her head. "Thanks, Paul. But I don't want it."

"Because of public opinion? Because if you let him down now, everyone will wonder if it was true, after all?"

"No." She half turned away, but his hands were at her shoulders, stopping her. She said almost angrily, "Let me alone, Paul!"

"How does this one sound, then?" he persisted. "We could go away—a million miles away, where nobody ever heard of the Ryan Giffords. I've a little money, enough to last until I can work up a new legal practice somewhere."

She repeated wonderingly, "Where nobody ever heard of the Ryan Giffords? Is there such a place, Paul, anywhere in the world?"

"There are lots of places, darling."

"Take it, Roslyn." She whirled at the soft, sardonic voice from the doorway. Ryan stood there, smiling at them. "It's the best offer he's made so far."

She was cold and still in the dead silence that followed. She had to say something—anything—but there was nothing to say. Paul—what was he doing, just standing there, watching Ryan? Why didn't he say something?

He said, "I'm sorry, Ryan."

"Don't bother. I've suspected for a long time."

Roslyn whispered, "You've suspected?"

"When a guy falls in love, it shows. When he avoids talking about my wife, I can add."

She was trembling. But she walked over to him.

"When a girl falls in love, I guess it shows, too, Ryan. But don't make any mistake about it, this time. Don't go guessing wrong."

He looked down at her. She saw his face go dark and still. A queer mockery slanted across his mouth, and she remembered that, only a moment ago, Paul had accused her of standing by Ryan because of public opinion. She closed her eyes. Don't let him say it. Please, please don't let him!

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Then she dared look up, and he had moved away from her without saying it after all. He stood with his hands rammed into his pockets, staring quite blindly at the pattern of city lights, like pinpricks in a black paper.

Paul said, "I'll go."

"Take the rest of them with you. Tell them we dropped dead. Tell them we eloped. Tell them anything."

"Sure."

HE WAS GONE. The music stopped. The people left. It was two in the morning and the building, even the whole city, seemed still, waiting.

Roslyn said huskily, "You were very clever to have known. I didn't, until he told me today."

"Save it."

"But it's true."

"I know it's true. I knew it would be true the first time I ever saw you. Maybe that's why I fell in love with you." A flatness stole into his words. "The contrast to Mona was terrific."

It sounded reasonable enough, but she knew he was not being reasonable at all. He was furious and bitter, and behind that neat, cold logic there was a passionate chaos that made no sense of anything.

He said in that same quiet, even voice, "Paul's a nice guy. Too damned nice, if you ask me, but then, I'm no judge. All I know is he's right up your alley, Roslyn. So why don't you take him?"

"Because I don't want him."

"There must be a few moments when you're sane, when you know I'm not what you want. Maybe you think you're in love with me, but you don't really want me." And he added, "Not any more."

"Ryan—"

"Skip it. You haven't lied to me yet, that I know of. Don't start now, just because you married the champion of them all."

"All right, Ryan." Her voice shook slightly. "I won't lie. I don't know how much you heard—"

"I heard Paul tell you that I killed Mona. And I heard you agree with him."

Her heart gave a crazy lurch, and then lay still. Staring up at him, she tried to see his face in the shadows. But there was no expression there, only a dark blur that was waiting.

She said in a small, faraway voice, "And you didn't?"

There was a dead silence. She was not breathing now. Faraway, a boat whistle blew, sounding lonely and a little frightening. Somewhere a truck went up a grade.

"Yes," he said dimly. "I killed her. They acquitted me, but I killed her."

Roslyn did not move. Not at all. It wasn't true. All along, even though she had seen the logic of it, she had felt deep in her heart that it was not true. Ryan hadn't done it; he was incapable of doing a thing like that. Even though her mind might accept it, someday he would tell her.

Only she hadn't realized until this moment that he had to be innocent. He had to, or her whole world that she had glued so tightly together with hope and pride and adoration, would shatter into bits at her feet.

She felt it rocking now, and could not lift a hand to stop it.

He said, "She was going to tell you. I knew what it would do to you, Roslyn, and it was only a few hours before the wedding. I had to stop her, quick, because I had to have you. I was so sure then that I loved you."

But afterward you knew it was Mona. Always and forever, Ryan, it was Mona.

She did not say it. She did not even think it. But the words were there, hanging in the terrible stillness of the night.

"It's better this way, after all," Ryan said. "Running off with Paul would be a mess, and you're not the type for it. Let him get the annulment for you. Then if

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you still want to marry him, you can."

"Ryan—" Her lips moved, but it wasn't even a sound.

"I'm leaving you, Roslyn. Flat. I know it's going to look like the devil, and people will probably think you learned the truth and threw me out. But without new, concrete evidence, they can't do a thing, no matter what they suspect."

She could not move, could not speak. He bent his head. His lips brushed the cold immobility of hers, lightly.

"Don't cry, Roslyn. You won't want me around when you've thought it over. It's all new to you now. But I've had half a year to mull on it, and you're not the one, darling. I wish you were because you've been wonderful. But I can't forget her, and every time I look at you—" He stopped.

She stared up at him, not believing any of it. It was like the first few moments of awakening after a nightmare, while you lie there rigid and terrified, seeing it all and knowing it isn't true.

"Good-by, Ros," he said gently.

She watched him go. She could see him in the living room, glancing around as if he had half of a mind to pick up a few of the cocktail glasses and empty the ash-trays before he left. Or maybe roll back the rug that someone had shoved aside for dancing. The rug, she realized numbly, bothered him the most, probably because he thought it was too heavy for her to handle.

Turning abruptly, he walked out. Hatless, coatless, just as he was, checking the door to be sure the latch was on, he walked out.

The door closed with a cool definiteness behind him.

But he'll come back. He has to come back. Lilacs in the rain, he said. He'll come back, he loves me.

But not as much as he loved Mona. Not as much as he loved, right now, the memory of Mona.

She went inside, rather dazedly, and straightened the rug. She took the glasses out into the kitchen and washed them. She emptied all the ashtrays, and wiped off all the tables and surfaces that had collected stray ashes and cocktail rings. She got the apartment back to that immaculate, decorator-designed perfection without realizing what she was doing or why she was doing it.

Then, when there was nothing left to do, she went into the bedroom, carefully put away her gown in the closet and went to bed.

She lay there, staring frozenly at the ceiling. Not crying. Not even daring to think.

RYAN did not come back.

She told herself the next morning that he would. She wore a gay, blue linen frock that turned her eyes several shades bluer. In the afternoon she changed to a little yellow silk frock, and after dinner slipped into a sleek hostess robe. The next day she did the same thing. And the next day. And the one after.

The fifth day she stayed in bed a little longer, and put on soft-draped slacks and a tailored blouse when she arose. She wore that all the way through dinner. And after that, she lay on the sofa and wondered just how long he was going to hold out.

Because he would be back. Even if everything he had said was true, he would have to come back to her someday.

Maybe she was being a fool, staying here, waiting. Nobody knew where she was, not even her family. She hadn't answered the telephone, and people must have supposed she and Ryan had gone away somewhere. A honeymoon, delayed, but real. Even Paul must think that, not knowing that she was lying here waiting. Because even Paul would not think she could be that dumb.

It was a week before she began to

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wonder where he was. And another week before she began to be worried. Even then, she wasn't worried about his coming back.

She had to know where he was.

That was when she phoned every hotel in town. He was not registered. She tried the clubs, without results. She phoned apartment houses, on the off chance he might have found something. She even phoned his office.

"Who?" the new girl on the switchboard asked, and then caught her error swiftly. "Oh, Mr. Gifford! He isn't in. May I help you?"

She had to pry it out of her, question by question, but the result was the same. Ryan hadn't been inside his office since a week before the wedding.

She could not call her family for help. No matter how unreasonable it might be, she would not call the police. A detective agency, then. A good one.

She ran her finger down the agencies in the Classified, trying to remember the name Paul had mentioned a few times. Clayton, that was it. She dialed the number and while her fingers slid the little circles around, thought of what she would say.

"Clayton Agency," a woman's voice said crisply.

"Clayton Agency," the woman said again.

Roslyn put the phone down and buried her face in her hands. How many times a day did women call detective agencies like that? How many men in the world said, "This is the end, baby," and closed a door with cool finality? And why was it that stupid, clinging women always refused to believe them?

She pushed back her hair and picked up the telephone again. Her fingers found a number that had become so familiar in the last half year that she did not have to look at the dial.

"Hello, Paul," she said huskily. "How long did you say it would take to get that annulment?"

Paul was elated, but mixed in with the elation was uneasiness.

"Roslyn, did I have anything to do with this?"

He hadn't. Not really. It was Mona. You can fight someone alive, but there is nothing to be done about a memory. Especially a memory that is all tangled up with guilt and passion and misery.

So she went everywhere with Paul. And she found that a few friends who had been looking the other way for several months suddenly remembered she was alive. Everyone liked the idea of Roslyn and Paul going places together. Everyone carefully avoided mentioning Ryan. It was as if there were something slightly unmentionable about him.

And maybe, she thought miserably, they were right.

She went to a good deal of trouble not to let the misery show. She wore new clothes. She tried new hair styles. She kept a brilliant smile pinned on so nobody would know.

"Roslyn seems a lot happier," they said. "She is certainly better off without him."

She heard chance remarks here and there, in low voices she was not supposed to hear. Then, one evening, she heard more than that.

It happened in her own apartment, the one she meant each day to leave, but somehow never did. Leaving meant going back home to the over-solicitousness of her parents, who would keep trying to peer behind that bright mask she wore. She liked it better here, alone, with nobody to suspect the bad moments. But she took care that the moments of aloneness were infrequent.

SO TONIGHT she gave a party. Paul was a big help, and though he was unobtrusive about it, she knew everyone

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was waiting for the annulment to go through, so Paul could step promptly into Ryan's place. She saw it in their smiles and gestures, and hated it. For a moment she hated even Paul, so thoroughly that she turned and walked into the bedroom to get away from it.

There was a dressing room adjoining, with stacks of drawers and wardrobes on one side, and a long mirrored vanity on the other. Through the open door she could hear two girls who had seated themselves on the upholstered bench for a quick check-up, but had lingered for cigarettes and gossip.

"Roslyn's sweet. I hope she marries Paul. That Ryan—"

"Poor Roslyn, I wonder if she knows where he is?"

"I don't suppose so. Nobody does, do they?"

"Larry saw him last week. You'd never guess—"

"Darling, *where?*"

One voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. "You won't tell Roslyn? Larry said if I breathed a word, he'd break my neck. It was down on the skidrow—you know, Front Street? He was with some stumblebum there, and Larry said they were both so plastered, Ryan didn't even recognize him."

"But Ryan doesn't drink!"

"That's what I thought, too. But Larry says—"

Roslyn opened the bedroom door again and closed it with a crisp sound. Walking across the room, she appeared at the dressing room doorway.

"Hi," she greeted, picking up a hairbrush with a hand that was amazingly steady. "You two look smug enough to be purring. Who are you ripping apart, and am I invited?"

They did not exchange glances. That closing door had warned them.

AFTER 2000 YEARS...

it suddenly happened

From Greek and Roman days right down to the present time, women have faced the same old monthly sanitary problem with essentially the same old methods. All through the Middle Ages and colonial America and the Victorian period, we find history crowded with change — new fashions, new ideas, new art, new inventions! But what about the woman alone with her "unspeakable days"? Civilization gave *her* no new ideas for twenty centuries!

• • •

Then suddenly it happened! An *essentially different kind* of monthly protection appeared. Invented by a doctor, it is used internally and is called Tampax. It requires no pins, belts or external pads. It causes no odor and no sign or trace of the Tampax can be detected under the sheerest clothing.... Made of pure surgical cotton, Tampax comes enclosed in slender white throw-away applicators, designed for quick and dainty insertion.

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"My husband," one of them sighed. "Honestly, that man simply infuriates me. He stands there talking politics by the hour."

"Speaking of husbands," the other murmured, rising, "not that I have one, but Larry swore this time he'd break our engagement if I spent more than fifteen minutes in private gossip. So I'd better get back out there."

Roslyn, smiling, stalled with the hairbrush until they were gone. Then she whirled to the wardrobe and snatched from a hanger the first wrap her hands fell upon. A short hallway connected with the kitchen, which was momentarily empty. Swiftly, lest someone appear to stop her, she slipped through the kitchen entry to the corridor. Not daring to wait for the elevator, she ran to the stairway.

In the lobby, she said to the switchboard man, "Ring my apartment, please. Ask for Paul Gunnison."

When he obeyed, she picked up the telephone. "Paul, it's Roslyn. I'm down in the lobby. Don't say anything, please. Just get out of there without anybody noticing and come down."

"All right," he promised very quietly.

He was there in moments. "Are we going somewhere?"

"Yes." She moved through the doorway. The night air was crisp and cool, ruffling the sheer red silk of her skirt and catching in her hair. "Front Street."

He drew a sharp breath. "Front Street? Are you crazy?"

She shook her head. "Where is your car?"

"Roslyn, that's skidrow: I wouldn't take you down there under any circumstances, and certainly not in an evening gown and a fur coat! You must be out of your mind!"

She said, "If you won't take me, I'll go alone. Because I have to do it, Paul. Ryan's there."

He stopped dead. "Ryan?"

"I just found out. I don't know where. But someone saw him on Front Street last week."

He did not move at all. Staring down at her, it seemed an eternity before his lips moved.

"You little fool. You idiotic, glorious little fool!"

Under the soft rays of a street light, tears glittered on her lashes.

"He married me, Paul. Nobody coerced him, nobody begged him to. He married me because he wanted to. That's the only real thing there is left. The rest is all a crazy nightmare."

His voice was hushed. "He doesn't want you, Roslyn!"

"I know." She was crying, trying not to. "Everything's all mixed up, Paul. But I have to go, I have to!"

He took her to his car and drove her down to Front Street, arguing all the way. He was stunned first, then annoyed, then furious.

"What about that annulment?" he snapped.

"It hasn't gone through yet."

"Do you want it to go through or not?"

"No," she said. "I mean—yes, of course. Oh, I don't know, Paul, I just don't know!"

"So you want to go crawling to him so he can kick you around some more," he said angrily. "He lied to you, he cheated you."

SHE WAS crying softly, without answering. Maybe Ryan had lied, but he hadn't cheated. There weren't any rules saying a man couldn't have two girls at once, or even ten of them. When he had asked Roslyn to marry him, he had broken off with Mona. Ryan had told her so, and she believed him.

If he had told her the world was filled with cracker crumbs, she would probably believe that, too.

So maybe Paul was right. Maybe she

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was a fool. The most pathetic kind of a fool, a girl who kept on hoping after a man said he was through.

Paul asked grimly, "Just Front Street, is that it? We cruise the street, we go into every joint that isn't padlocked, looking for a guy who doesn't want to be found?"

She did not answer, but that was what they did. Looking twice at every bum who shambled down the sidewalk. Peering into dark little nooks that smelled of beer. Being stared at, hearing someone jeer, "Well, if it ain't the opera set!"

"I've had enough," Paul snapped. "I'm taking you home."

"No," she said.

"Just where did you pick up your information?"

"I overheard it."

"There are a lot of things cockeyed about it. Ryan doesn't drink. And he wouldn't be caught dead in a neighborhood like this. Go home, go to bed, forget it. He's gone to Los Angeles or New York or Ketchikan—any place but Front Street."

She said with a tired sort of stubbornness, "He's here. Larry saw him. I know it doesn't make sense, but he's here. Somewhere."

Stale little liquor joints. Juke boxes. Loud voices and sometimes louder laughter. Men who were too short or too fat or too little or too big. Men who had the wrong faces or the wrong hair or not any hair.

"We're going home," Paul said, when they had combed from front to rear the largest barroom, down where Front Street met the harbor. They stood there near the cigarette machine, baffled and weary. This time she did not refuse.

"Tomorrow," she said dully.

"Roslyn—"

"I'm coming back tomorrow," she repeated. "He's here somewhere. Larry saw him."

"Roslyn." It was soft, intense, yet somehow defeated. "What are you going to do when you find him? He doesn't want you."

She did not answer. There was no use in answering.

Near them two men were arguing with a low, slurred stubbornness over whose turn it was to pay for a drink. Over in a corner, three others were trying to sing a song, but couldn't seem to get together on it. Up near the front, a man and a woman were quarrelling loudly.

She heard a voice say, "My turn, old man. You paid last time."

"That was time before last. My turn again."

"Naw, my turn."

"Let's flip. You got a quarter?"

"Sure, I got a quarter."

"You flip, see?"

"Naw, you flip."

Roslyn turned her head slowly to look at them. In the dimness she saw that one man had the quarter now, and was trying to balance it carefully so he could flip it. He seemed to have trouble. The other man was watching with an intentness that made it a life-or-death matter.

SHE STOOD there, looking at that other man. His back was turned to her. He wore an old, shabby coat. His shirt was limp, without a necktie, its collar unfastened. He needed a haircut, but his hair was black and curly. He needed a shave, but there was something about the line of that turned-away jaw that tipped her heart over, slowly and painfully.

Before Paul could stop her, she moved over to the table.

"I can flip the quarter for you."

Two pairs of eyes raised to her. She took the quarter. "Call it."

"Heads," Ryan said.

"Sure, heads," the other agreed. "I mean, tails for me."

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Paul was there, a cold rage on his face. "Roslyn, what the devil—"

She shook his hand off. The quarter came down heads. She stared down into the dark eyes. Her words were softly bitter.

"You see how easy it is, darling? You always win. Even if you think you don't."

"Hey, who's the babe?" the other man demanded petulantly. "Don't I know her? I seen her somewhere. Orchids! That's it, she wears orchids."

"Yeah," Ryan murmured, rising. His dark eyes glittered slightly in the dimness. "Where's your orchid, babe?"

She stood there, watching them amble off together. Paul's arm was around her, leading her out, but she hardly realized it. He was scolding her. Was it possible he hadn't recognized Ryan? The light was poor, but he must have seen.

"So now you know," Paul said at the door. "You won't listen, will you? You have to stick out your chin and get it clipped."

She said thickly, "It was Ryan."

"Sure, it was Ryan. He's gone to hell and he can stay there. He's right where he—"

That was when they heard the shots, cutting his words off unfinished. Roslyn went rigid. And before Paul could stop her, she ran out of the place and down the street.

Paul tore after her, but she had a head start. "Roslyn!"

"It's Ryan," she sobbed. "I know it's Ryan!"

Down the street a man was running, darting, stumbling. From somewhere Ryan shouted, "Get him, Paul! It's Mona's husband. He killed her!"

She turned toward the voice, letting Paul dash after the man down the street. In the distance there was a police whistle. Another one answered.

Ryan was standing in the shadows of an alley, leaning against a brick building. In the darkness he looked very casual, and very pale.

"Hello, sweet."

"Are you all right?"

"Sure," he agreed, without moving.

"So that's what you were doing, playing sleuth in the corniest imaginable way." She was angry and frightened and crying. "Don't you know you could have been killed?"

Feet were pounding on the pavement. A policeman shouted, "What's going on here? Who fired those shots?"

"Luke Mayo," Ryan said quietly. "You'd better get him before he tangles with Paul Gunnison. Mayo has a gun, and Paul keeps one in his car. Anything could happen."

A flashlight blinded them, then went off again. "Who are you?"

"Ryan Gifford. This is my wife. If you want us, your office has a complete file."

"Oh sure. You all right, Mr. Gifford?"

"Sure," Ryan said tiredly. "I'm all right."

The officer left. Somewhere there was a siren in the night. "Is that Paul's car, parked across the street?"

"Yes."

"Let's take it. Cabs are far between down here."

The car doors were open and the keys were in the ignition.

"Take it, Roslyn."

"Ryan, are you all right?"

"Four weeks in joints like that, and who would be? Get in."

SHE GOT in and started the car. "Will they catch him?"

"Yes. He's too well-tanked to think straight." He slumped in the seat, his head back, his eyes closed. "I'm pretty thoroughly tanked, myself. I hope I never have to look at another slug of gin as long as I live."

"Why did you have to do it this way?"

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she asked, her voice shaken. "Why didn't you let the police take care of it? That's what you're paying taxes for, isn't it? Not to go off getting high with a cheap skidrow killer. And lying to me like that, telling me you'd done it, and turning me over to Paul."

He didn't answer. She looked at him, and after a minute she put her hand on his arm, but he did not move. He was out.

It was not until she stopped the car in Mira Vista Terrace that she saw the blood that had seeped down onto the upholstery of Paul's car. There was quite a lot of it. She was terrified, too frightened to think straight.

"Ryan!"

He said in a dim, faraway voice, "It's all right, darling. It's nothing serious. I just didn't want those cops slapping me into an ambulance, that's all. I didn't mean to black out on you."

"You're hurt—"

"Creased," he said in that same remote voice. "Six months in the pokey and a month on Front Street gave me a swell vocabulary. Why did you come down there?"

"Someone said you were there."

"You never learn, do you?"

"I'll get someone to help you—"

"I'll help myself, thanks."

He got out of the car. He stood straight and cool and tall. His coat covered everything so neatly, they could walk through the lobby with nothing more than a dark glance from the janitor who, after midnight, took charge of the desk and switchboard. In the elevator, Ryan pushed the fourth button with a wry grin.

"That ain't no tramp," he said. "It's her husband."

She whispered, "Ryan, stop it!"

"Sorry. It's the low company I've been keeping."

"How could you do it?"

"What did you want me to do—stay a gentleman and go on taking it until hell froze? An acquittal's no good. It just means they couldn't quite prove it, that's all."

"But you needn't have told me you did it. I'll never forgive you for that."

"It worked, didn't it?"

"You wanted to be rid of me."

"Yes."

The cage stopped. She flung open the door before he could reach for it. She walked down the hall, slim and furious and heartsick, her flame gown swishing about her toes and the mink coat slung carelessly over her shoulders.

The party had drifted somewhere else probably, she thought dully. "Was it a different party," Ryan asked, "or haven't you cleaned up the place since I left?"

She turned. He had closed the door and was leaning against it casually. But the utter whiteness that was under his tan frightened her.

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"You had better lie down before you fall down."

"I have no intention of falling down." He lifted his hand to touch her hair lightly. Then his fingers slid through the soft silkiness of it. "Roslyn—"

Everything within her went still at his touch. Hypnotized, she stared back into the deep, translucent darkness of his eyes. He bent his head. His mouth touched hers, soft as a prayer. And she thought, with a tired sort of helplessness, Is he kissing me or Mona?

He lifted his head. She saw the glazed look that came into his eyes.

"I guess you're right—" It was a mere breath of a whisper.

And he slid into a silent, motionless heap at her feet.

SHE BROUGHT water and bandages, and cut away his shirt. What she saw terrified her for an instant. And then, fighting down the panic, she went to work.

It was not as bad as that first glance had indicated. The bullet had ripped through his side rather nastily, but not seriously. She did the best she could; and then, since trying to move him was out of the question, brought a pillow and a blanket.

She sat there on the floor beside him, her skirt making a flame red pool around her, staring at his stubby black lashes and crooked eyebrows. And a sick fury went through her—fury against the sort of woman Mona Mayo had been, that all these things could happen to a man because he fell in love with her. And a blind, shaken, miserable fury against Ryan, too, for loving a woman like that.

In the bedroom after she phoned the doctor, she ripped back the covers from one of the twin beds. From Ryan's half of the double dresser she took a pair of pajamas that long ago had been removed from a suitcase, and had never been repacked.

Ryan said quietly from the doorway, "Thank you for a lot of things, Roslyn."

She stiffened. Then, very carefully, she tossed the pajamas onto the bed. She could not trust her voice.

"Do you suppose I could negotiate a shower and a shave?"

"No." It was shorter than she meant it to sound.

"I feel like a tramp."

"Aren't you?" she asked in a misery so acute, her words were harsh.

He eyed her for a long moment. Then, picking up the pajamas, he went into the dressing room. She watched the closed door, waiting for it to open again, listening tensely. If anything happened to him—

He came out, wearing the pajamas and a lounging robe. He looked very clean, though she hadn't heard the bathroom shower. And he had, despite her warning, shaved.

Numbly she watched him take the pillow off her bed and drop it on top of his. He stretched out on top of the turned-back covers and, propped up by the pillows, lighted a cigarette.

She moved over to the window, to stand there looking out at a sleeping city that did not penetrate her awareness.

Ryan said, "I hope this is legal."

"Legal?"

"Us. Or are we annulled?"

She said a trifle thickly, "We're legal."

The telephone rang. She turned slowly. It was on the table within easy reach of Ryan's hand, but he did not touch it. He lay there, his eyes closed, his cigarette slowly eating itself away between his fingers.

She picked it up. "Hello."

"I suppose," Paul said, "it was that erstwhile pal of mine who stole my car?"

"Yes. I'm sorry, Paul, but—"

"Forget it; it's an old college gag. We used to do it all the time. Look, Roslyn, I'm at the police station. Tell him Mayo hasn't exactly confessed. He's too well

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oiled to tell the same story twice. They've got him so mixed up, he's as good as hanged."

"Then he did it?" she asked unsteadily.

"Sure, he did it. The cops were good Joes and let me listen in, as Ryan's lawyer. Roslyn—" He hesitated.

"Yes, Paul?"

"Tell him," Paul said, "he can steal my car any time he wants to." And he hung up.

She put the phone down. She said, looking down at Ryan, "They have Mayo."

"Sure." He didn't move. He didn't open his eyes.

"Paul handed you sort of a backhanded apology."

"I know. I heard it."

"How did you know it was Mayo who did it?"

"It had to be someone," Ryan said without looking at her, "and it damned well wasn't me. Mayo was a logical choice, but they couldn't pin it on him. He started drinking after she died, and wound up on Front Street. I tried to worm into his confidence with a lot of lies, but he was always a little cagey. He'd hint, but would never give."

"But you got him."

"Technically, no. It was his seeing you that did it. Recognizing you made him realize I was the same man who had been on trial. I suppose it was the shot he took at me that rattled him into inventing stories for the police."

She said tensely, "You knew you were fooling with a murderer. You could have been killed!"

He looked up at her. His eyes went dark and brilliant.

"What about you?" he asked. "You thought you were married to one. You took a chance too."

"That was different. That was— We are—" She groped for words without finding them.

His hand closed over hers. He drew her nearer to sit on the edge of the bed. He said gently, "You loved me enough to stay, didn't you, darling? And I loved you enough to get out. You must see that. I had to go. I couldn't drag you any farther into it, with half your friends believing I was guilty—with always and forever that question in your own mind."

"That isn't what you said, Ryan. You said that Mona—" She stopped. Tears slipped onto her lashes and glittered there.

He brushed them away with his fingertips. "I know. That was my last resort, when I saw that telling you I'd done it wasn't going to work. I had to get rid of you, somehow. And for good. I didn't know then about Mayo. I wasn't even thinking about him. All I could think of was that Paul was hanging around, damn him, so obviously perfect for you, while I'd do nothing but make shambles of your life."

She was crying a little. "I don't want Paul."

He murmured, with a breath of laughter in it, "Rest assured, my love, you're never going to get him. Barring any more murders, or quarrels, or shootings, we're going to have a nice long honeymoon—say fifty years, to start?"

He drew her into his arms. His mouth had a tender curve as he added softly, almost against her lips, "If we ever start, that is. We've been married seven months, but—"

The telephone rang. They looked at each other. Their heads turned, cheek to cheek. It rang again.

Ryan breathed, "Oh, no!"

"It's probably the doctor," Roslyn whispered. "Ryan, what do you bet he'll tell you you belong in a hospital?"

"In that case, who wants a doctor?" he asked.

And somewhere in the middle of their kiss, the ringing stopped.

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Once

"I'm sure Miss Paige understands that it's business before pleasure," Val said sarcastically.

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Kissed, Twice Shy

By
Anne Fowler Hill

♥

It took one kiss for Carol to know she loved Scott—and that he wasn't for her.

CAROL PAIGE hurried through the Artists' Entrance of the Orange Network, fright growing inside of her with each step. "I mustn't let any nervousness show," she told herself between clenched teeth. "I mustn't."

The guard at the desk looked up with a bright questioning, "Good morning."

Carol smiled and managed in a faint voice to return his greeting. Then even

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more faintly, she added, "Miss Paige for the Sunshine Oats rehearsal."

The man checked a list on his desk. "Yes, Miss Paige, they're expecting you." He motioned to the left. "Studio A, right down the hall."

Carol nodded and forced her small, neatly clad feet along the passage, wishing desperately that she could turn tail and run back the way she had come. But she couldn't. She'd won a singing contest in her small midwestern home town and it had led to Hollywood. And here I am, she thought, with a chance any girl would give her eye teeth for and I have to be scared to death.

She halted at the open stage door of Studio A, her hazel eyes, between long dark lashes, filling with panic as she watched the members of the orchestra moving about the stage adjusting music racks and tuning instruments.

She swallowed the dryness in her throat, wondering if she could ever sing another note. She took a deep breath. But I have to sing. Better than ever before. For Jeanie.

The money from the program would mean that Carol's younger sister, Jeanie, could finish her college education, and Carol was determined on that point. It was what had induced her to try for the contest and put all of her effort into winning it.

"I can't fail Jeanie," she reminded herself determinedly, and, lifting her head, she stepped through the door.

A tall, rangy, blond young man got up from the piano and crossed toward her, smiling, his teeth flashing white against the tan of his skin.

"You must be Carol Paige, our singer," he said. "And I'm Scott Kendall." He waved at the musicians. "I try to lead these guys." He stuck out a long, capable-looking hand. "We've been expecting you."

Carol smiled and shook hands. Then, surprisingly, she couldn't say anything because, all at once, her eyes had lost themselves in his warm laughing ones and a crazy little excitement was stirring through her.

"We've heard you have a great voice," he went on, "but we didn't hear you had red hair and—" He stopped, his mouth quirking.

"And freckles," she finished for him, motioning to the light sprinkle of freckles across the bridge of her uptilted nose.

"But I like freckles," he reassured her swiftly. He regarded her small slender figure. "And you know something else? You're so tiny I think I'll call you Bonnie Wee."

She smiled uncertainly. His eyes searched hers a moment. As if sensing her uneasiness, he added firmly, "And you're not to worry, Bonnie Wee, we'll put your voice across."

She laughed up at him, her confidence returning in a rush. With Scott Kendall leading the orchestra she could sing anything.

A clipped feminine voice suddenly cut through the loud speaker from the producer's booth. "Scott, if that's Miss Paige, will you send her to the booth, please?"

Carol looked at the slender brunette girl in the booth. For a second, the girl's dark penetrating eyes met Carol's and, inexplicably, the uneasiness surged over her again.

"That's Val Loring," Scott explained hurriedly, "the producer for the J. Harry Simpson Advertising Agency. They're putting on the show for the Sunshine Oats Company, you know." His eyes narrowed slightly. "Better talk it over with her."

ON THE way to the booth, Carol had the uncomfortable feeling that she was a lamb on the way to slaughter, and facing Val Loring in the booth, the feeling was even stronger. In the first place, she hadn't expected to find a feminine pro-

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ducer and, to add to her uneasiness, she'd never seen anyone as coldly appraising as Val Loring or as overpoweringly lovely. Tall and slender, the girl's dark hair was drawn up in a sleek bun on top of her head. She wore a simple biege dress with out-of-this-world lines, and her only ornaments were huge gold earrings and fantastically wide gold bracelets.

Her vivid red lips parted in a thin smile and Carol withheld a shiver.

"I suppose you know that singing on a national hookup is going to be a hard job, Miss Paige," she said briskly. "Especially with a person like you whose only experience has been on a small local station."

Some of the confidence Scott had given Carol deserted her, but she managed to keep her voice even when she said, "But I won the contest, Miss Loring."

The dark girl eyed her coolly. "The decision was between you and two others, Miss Paige." Her lips tightened. "But John W. Garth, the sponsor of Sunshine Oats, insisted that we use you." Her eyes sliding over Carol seemed to say, "Why, I can't imagine." Aloud, she continued, "And, of course, you know we must please our sponsors, especially those with important accounts."

Carol gripped her smart new tan handbag with tense fingers, her confidence zooming downward several more degrees. So John W. Garth, owner of Sunshine Oats, was responsible for her being here? She'd certainly not suspected him of having anything to do with it. He was from her home town, of course, and she'd known him all her life, but further than that, she'd never given it a second thought.

Val was going on, "Mr. Garth's in Hollywood for the opening of the show, and he'll probably drop in for one of our rehearsals."

Carol nodded. "I never dreamed he had anything to do with my winning the contest."

Val Loring inclined her head to one side. "Perhaps it's a romantic angle." She paused significantly. "We have a lot of that to contend with." Her cool eyes went over Carol again and, although Carol knew her tan suit and luggage-brown accessories were smart, Val's look made her feel suddenly small-townish and inadequate.

"Of course it isn't a romantic angle," she denied, flushing hotly. "Mr. Garth's from my home town, an old friend of the family—"

Val's clipped voice interrupted her. "Romantic angle, family friend, hometown pride, whatever, can't influence us too much." She shrugged. "You'll have to be better than the others, or else."

Carol nodded again, too confused for speech. Dazedly, as a drowning person gropes for a helping hand, she glanced through the glass partition at Scott. He sent her a wide, reassuring smile and one of his eyes closed in a wink.

Her heart surged upward. She had one friend at least in this bewildering place. She turned back to Val Loring, but the girl's eyes were on the orchestra leader and Carol, reading their rapt expression, tensed with sudden realization. Val Loring was in love with Scott Kendall. There was no mistaking that look.

The next second, Val's penetrating glance swung back to Carol.

She saw Scott smile and wink at me, Carol thought nervously. And, as if to confirm the suspicion, Val said, "I might as well tell you, you needn't count on any help from our orchestra leader. This is his first big break and he'll have all he can do to protect his own job. It's seldom that an unknown leader has a chance like this." She jangled her bracelets noisily. "You understand that, of course?"

Carol managed a stiff, "Yes, I understand." A hollow sick feeling ground at her stomach. I'm on my own, all right, and with Val Loring to please, I'm not sure that I can make it.

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Three men entered the booth at that moment, and vaguely Carol heard Val introduce them as the writers and technician. And then somehow she was back on the stage and Scott was grinning down at her and saying, "Come now, Bonnie Wee, nothing's as hopeless as you look. I'll help you and you'll go over big."

Looking into his warm, reassuring eyes, Carol's spirits rose, and when he led her to the microphone and lowered it for her, she was quite confident again. With another wink at her, he went to his platform, the members of the orchestra coming to attention, ready for his starting signal.

Intuitively, Carol felt Val's eyes on her, but she didn't look in the direction of the booth. She'd keep her eyes on Scott and she'd be all right.

HE RAISED his baton and the clear rich tones of piano, violins, saxaphones and trumpets swelled upward and outward to fill the studio with the notes of *All the World Is Waiting for the Sunrise,* the theme song which Carol was to sing.

She took a deep breath, her eyes held rigidly on Scott and when he gave her a quick nod, she let her voice out, the notes, to her great relief, flowing out sweet and true with all the husky, haunting tones that made her voice so unusual and appealing.

After she had sung a few bars, Scott stopped the orchestra and she broke off on a ragged breath. When he came over to her she looked at him with wide, startled eyes. "Wasn't my voice—" she began and stopped, unable to go on.

"Your voice is wonderful," he said quickly. "But I'm going to have to transpose a bit for your key."

She let out a relieved breath, and he went on, "Where your voice is soft, I'll use the string section under it and where it's louder I'll build it up with more solid accompaniment." He gave her a quick pat. "Keep it up, you're doing fine."

When they started again her voice was stronger, and just as she was recovering her old assurance, her notes coming out fuller and rounder, Val Loring's voice cut in from the booth.

"Scott, Miss Paige's voice is too loud. Have her stand back from the microphone a bit."

He motioned to Carol and she moved back, but when they began the song again her voice was jerky.

Val shook her head and said, "Try it again."

After that, Val cut in with so many suggestions that Carol's nerves tightened up until it was all but impossible for her to make a sound. And to add to the general confusion, the members of the orchestra fidgeted nervously.

Finally, Scott banged down his baton and, rumpling his hair in annoyance, strode over and into the booth. The musicians gathered in groups whispering and gesturing to each other.

Carol crossed to an empty chair at the side of the stage and dropped into it wearily. Everything had gone beautifully until Val Loring started her endless criticisms. I can't understand it, Carol thought. It's as though she wants to make me too nervous to sing.

She glanced at Scott talking to Val. From the girl's agitated expression it looked as though a heated argument was in progress.

The voices of two of the violinists sifted through Carol's thoughts. "She's putting the pressure on Scott, all right," one of them said. "I wonder why."

The other violinist gave a short laugh. "Didn't you know she's taking him off of sustaining shows and giving him this job? It's his first real break. And, boy, from the looks of things, he's going to earn it." He gave another short laugh. "They've been going around together. I saw them at the races at Santa Anita last week."

The first musician nodded. "Can't

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blame him. She's one of the most attractive pieces in Hollywood at the moment and he's one of our gay young blades." He shrugged. "And don't forget she's important. Her word carries weight in radio circles."

Not wanting to hear anymore, Carol got up and moved away. So that was it, she thought. Val Loring, by giving Scott his chance, had put him under obligation to her and, from the looks of things, she didn't intend to let him forget it for a minute. And she's in love with him, Carol reminded herself. And because he's being nice to me, she's making things difficult.

She squared her shoulders. Well, Scott Kendall didn't mean a thing to her. But she wondered vaguely why the musician's statement that Val and Scott were going around together should bother her so much.

SOMETHING made her glance in the direction of the booth, and she caught a sharp breath. Scott was smiling at her and the excitement she'd felt earlier zipped through her again.

She turned her head away. Scott, a perfect stranger, was beginning to mean more to her than she cared to admit. It was unreasonable. Insane. "And so, Carol, my girl," she told herelf firmly, "if this job means anything to you, and it certainly does, you'll have to watch yourself."

When Scot returned and dismissed the musicians for lunch, Carol forgot some of her resolutions. And when he leaned over her with his reckless smile she forgot all of them.

"I'll have to start showing you Hollywood, Bonnie Wee," he said, "and I might as well begin by lunching with you at the Brown Derby. How about it?"

"I'd love to," she began and broke off with an indrawn breath.

Val Loring was beside Scott, smiling up at him. "I'm afraid you'll have to postpone the sightseeing tour for the moment, Scott." She held up some papers. "I want you to go over these contracts with me."

He kept his smile. "Couldn't I see them later this afternoon, Val—" he began, but she shook her head.

"Sorry, but I have to get them back to the agency by three, and I want your okay." She added more decisively, "We'll have some lunch sent in." She looked archly at Carol. "I'm sure Miss Paige understands that it's business before pleasure."

Carol glanced at Scott. His lips were compressed in a tight line. She thought, Yes, I understand a lot more, Val Loring. You're not going to let him out of your sight if you can help it.

Aloud, she said hastily, "Of course, I understand." She made herself smile. "I'll make out quite nicely in the restaurant next door."

But she didn't make out nicely. She

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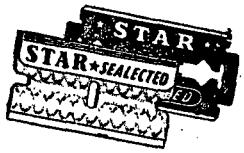

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scarcely tasted the food, and she went back to rehearsal determined to forget everything but her singing. She'd remember all of Val Loring's demands: stand back from the microphone for louder notes, step closer for lower ones. She'd be so good, Val couldn't find one criticism.

"And I'll forget Scott Kendall," she vowed to herself resolutely. "I won't look at him and then that crazy excitement won't jump around inside of me. I'll remember that Val's in love with him and that he's in love with her."

But when she was in front of the mike again, she couldn't somehow manage to keep her eyes from straying to Scott, and she couldn't manage the glad little breathlessness that insisted on bouncing around inside.

The rehearsal went a little better than the previous one. Val didn't cut in as much because Carol studiously followed her suggestions, and she could see that Scott, apparently reluctant, followed the same instructions.

Once, however, after Val cut in with a particularly sharp order to Carol, he called a rest period. Before Val could leave the booth, he crossed to Carol and said swiftly, "I think it would do both of us good to forget work for a while. How about going to dinner with me at the Hollywood Roosevelt tonight?"

Carol was surprised at the way her heart pounded. She had time only for a quick nod before Val came up to them and said tersely, "We'll call off rehearsals now. And, Scott, I might as well tell you, things will have to go better tomorrow or we'll have to make some changes."

Scott nodded, but his jaw hardened, and a warm little feeling ran through Carol. Scott was on her side. Then the next second the warm feeling died.

Val was patting Scott's arm possessively and saying, "Too bad I had to call off the dinner party at the apartment tonight, darling, but," she shrugged prettily, "the president of the company insisted on a meeting."

CAROL COULDN'T look at Scott. She needed a moment to regain her poise, to hide from him the fact that being second choice mattered. "A gay young blade," one of the violinists had said. Her heart twisted painfully. Odd that she should meet a Hollywood wolf on her first day at the studio.

She bit her lips hard. If there were only some way to get out of the dinner date tonight, but to make some excuse now that she had accepted would look as though she really cared. Well, she'd remember to keep things light and impersonal; show Scott that he didn't matter to her.

Val swung away with a knowing smile, and Scott said as though nothing had happened, although amusement flickered in his eyes, "If you'll tell me where to pick you up, I'll call for you around sevenish."

Carol managed to tell him in a gay little voice, and then, somehow, she was outside rushing up the street in the direction of her hotel. And with each swift step she thought, Hollywood wolf! I'll show him!

But dressing for the date, she had difficulty keeping a gay little sense of expectancy in check. And when the florist box arrived with a gardenia corsage from Scott, she had all she could do to remember that the gesture was merely a bit of technique. Just the same, she combed her new short hair cut into a swirl of shining curls, and took a long time to apply a becoming new shade of make-up to her cheeks and full soft lips. Carefully, she slipped into her blush-pink dinner dress with a wispy iridescent sequin cape, fastened the flowers in her hair, and surveyed herself in the mirror.

"There," she told her reflection, "he won't think you're small-town in that outfit." Then she saw her flushed cheeks and bright eyes and said disgustedly, "Idiot.

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Remember who Scott Kendall is. And remember he doesn't mean a thing to you."

But later, seated across from him at dinner, she had a hard time to remember anything except that his eyes, forcing hers to look into his, were the bluest and warmest she had ever seen. And, strangely, when he talked to her, it was as though she had known him always.

"I'm from a small town, too," he told her with a little twist of his lips. "And sometimes I wonder if Hollywood is worth all we put into it. Look at today, you and I—" He stopped abruptly, running his hand through his hair.

Carol wanted to ask him about his home town, about his job, about Val Loring, but before she could find suitable words, Scott stood up and reaching for her hand pulled her to her feet. "But there's to be no shop talk tonight, Bonnie Wee," he said gayly. "We're dancing."

In spite of her determination not to let Scott matter, when he put his arms about her and guided her onto the dance floor her heart soared. Never had she danced with anyone as she danced with him, her cheek close to his, their feet in perfect rhythm, their bodies floating as if propelled by a soft vagrant breeze. And the shuffle of wire brush on drums, the knocking of gourds, indolent and haunting, wrapped her in a magic world alone with Scott.

The magic still held her when he stopped his car in front of her hotel and, turning sharply, drew her into his arms. Then he was kissing her in a way she'd never been kissed before, his lips warm and tender and demanding on hers, and she was responding, her heart crying out, "This is what I've been waiting for all my life. This kiss." And the kiss went on and on between them, the night about her filling with stardust and the sound of whispering violins.

At last, with a swift movement, he held her face in his hands and looked deep into her eyes. "I've never kissed a girl like that before, Bonnie Wee," he murmured, his voice low and husky.

She gazed at him in unbelieving wonder, not wanting to speak, not wanting to move, for fear of breaking the spell.

He went on softly, "I think I knew the moment I saw you at the studio that you were walking into my life, into my heart."

Abruptly, she crashed back to reality, the magic shattering about her. How could she have forgotten Val Loring? She drew a jagged, hurting breath. Scott was in love with Val and yet he could make love to another girl like this.

She gave a bright laugh to hide the hard, new misery in her heart. "Even in a small town we learn to know technique when we hear it, Scott Kendall."

He stared at her, his eyes dark, searching. "Surely you can't believe that was technique? A line?" he said harshly.

She laughed the same brittle hurting laugh. "I'm afraid I do."

HE REACHED for her shoulders, but she sprang out of the car and slammed the door. Somehow she held back the tears that pressed against her eyelids. "And thanks for a delightful evening, Scott. It was most illuminating."

He tried to follow her, but she wheeled around and ducked into the hotel lobby, tears blurring her eyes.

She spent most of the night trying to forget Scott. She went to bed and began to read the latest novel, but Scott's eyes, warm and intense, kept getting between her and the printed pages. She tried to sleep, but sleep eluded her, and in desperation, she sat by the window and stared down at the late traffic straggling along Vine Street.

When dawn arrived, she had convinced herself that she was all kinds of a fool, and that falling in love with a person after only a few hours was as preposterous as it was absurd. "It just doesn't happen,"

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she advised herself determinedly. And with this truth firmly fixed in her mind, she dressed and went to the studio.

The first person she saw was Scott. All he had to do was to send her a mocking, half smile and the crazy excitement started all over again in her heart. Only this time it was far worse.

She gave him a brief, "Good morning," and looked at the booth. Val Loring wasn't there yet, so she had a moment to get her fast pounding heart back to normal.

Scott strolled over to her. "We have some unfinished business to talk over, Bonnie Wee," he said steadily. "How about lunch today?"

She shook her head, avoiding his eyes, and he said, "Well, dinner tonight?"

"Sorry," she breathed.

He persisted, "Tomorrow? Tomorrow night?"

She shook her head emphatically and he chuckled. "I'll keep on until you give in. I might as well warn you."

Val came through the door at that moment, and for once, Carol was almost glad to see her. At least, it relieved her of the necessity of answering Scott at the moment, and the work would give her time to build up her resistance to him.

The rehearsal didn't go any better. Val cut in even more often, her orders sharper and more demanding.

After an hour, Carol was trembling with nervousness, her singing breathless and shaky. She didn't look at Scott, but she could tell by the way the orchestra played that they were as edgy as she.

Finally, Scott called a halt for a smoking period and, throwing down his baton, barged over to the producer's booth. Carol let the other members of the show file out, surreptitiously watching Scott and Val. From their agitated gestures, she could tell that another argument was going on.

Once Val glanced in Carol's direction, and her eyes had a hard look in them. Carol shuddered. Scott's probably taking my part, she thought, and that makes Val dislike me all the more. She drew a sharp breath. It may mean his job and it's his first real break. She stood quite still for a long moment, then she lifted her head resolutely. There was only one thing to do—resign. She'd never make good with Val Loring directing the show, and by withdrawing she would, at least, protect Scott's job.

And she knew suddenly that Scott's success meant a lot to her. She might as well face facts. She loved him. No matter what he was or did or said, she knew, by the deep dull ache in her heart that she loved him, and by resigning she'd give him a chance.

And what about Jeanie? part of her mind asked. She let out a long sigh. She'd have to find another job. Jeanie would have to wait.

Her mind full of these thoughts, she turned blindly toward the stage entrance, and then she stopped abruptly. John W. Garth, tall and distinguished looking in his gray suit with the touch of gray at his temples, stepped through the door, grabbing her by each shoulder.

She wondered vaguely how long he had been standing outside, but forgot the thought immediately in the rush of joy at seeing him.

"Carol," he said delightedly, "little Carol Paige."

"John W. Garth," she cried and, impulsively, threw her arms around him. She caught a glimpse of Scott in the booth and even his hard stare failed to diminish her pleasure in seeing someone familiar and friendly in this town of strangers.

Mr. Garth smiled broadly. "The folks at home are expecting great things of you, Carol."

She nodded and tried to smile, but she knew it was a poor attempt.

He didn't seem to notice. "How're things going?"

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SHE OPENED her mouth to tell him about Val's unreasonableness, but closed it again: If she did that, it might endanger Scott's job.

"All right," she said faintly.

His eyes bored into hers. "You mean you don't like singing with the show?"

"I love it," she said hastily. She couldn't, after all he had done for her, appear unappreciative of his efforts.

"That's all I want to know," he said, his jaw tightening.

She glanced over her shoulder. Scott and Val were coming across the stage. Val said something to Scott and by his frown Carol saw that he hadn't liked whatever it was Val had said.

She turned back to Mr. Garth. "Only—" she began and broke off helplessly. After she resigned, she'd write Mr. Garth a letter of explanation.

He took her arm. "I think I know all about it," he said, "and you're not to bother your pretty head about it." Then, abruptly, he turned to greet Val and Scott.

They talked for a few minutes, then Mr. Garth looked at Val. "I'm taking Carol to lunch now, Miss Loring, but I'm calling a meeting at the agency at two." His voice grew crisp. "I'd like you to be there."

She nodded. "I'll call off the rehearsal this afternoon, then."

He shook his head. "I think Scott will be able to carry on." He led Carol toward the door. As he turned away she caught a glimpse of Scott's face. His expression was remote and unreadable and puzzled her all during lunch.

And back at the studio, although Val was not there with her constant criticisms, Scott remained cold and aloof. He didn't look at Carol except when it was necessary to give some instructions, and when he spoke, his voice was terse and businesslike.

But, even so, the rehearsal without Val Loring went smoothly and Carol's spirits lifted some. Perhaps, after all, things would work out. When Scott dismissed the musicians, Carol, despite her resolutions to avoid him, found some excuse to hang around for a few minutes, irrationally hoping against hope that he would repeat his invitation to go to dinner.

But when he left with a cool nod, she went miserably back to her hotel to face what she knew would be a long, lonesome evening. She started to go to a show, but instead sat tensely by the telephone, not even admitting to herself how much she wished Scott would call.

And when the telephone bell finally rang, she began to shake so hard it was difficult to pick up the receiver. She managed to answer somehow and when John Garth's voice boomed into the room, she was so disappointed it took her a long second before she could speak. He wanted to take her to dinner at Ciro's and when she offered some lame excuse, he said, "Nonsense, child. I'll pick you up in half an hour."

Before she could protest, he hung up and there was nothing to do but hurriedly comb her hair, apply fresh make-up and slip into her low-cut white dinner dress with its long swirling skirt. Then, forcing a bright smile, she went down to meet Mr. Garth.

And at Ciro's, seated opposite him, she held the smile, covering up her heartache with feverish small talk.

He regarded her quizzically and finally put his hand over hers. "Come on, Carol, honey," he said gently, "tell me what's worrying you."

She laughed, but it was high and off-key. "There isn't anything, really—" she began, and stopped on a shaky breath.

He pressed her hand. "You're trying too hard, child. Better get it off your chest.

She looked into his kind friendly eyes, and before she knew it, she was unburdening her heart. In a little rush, she told him about Scott and Val being in love

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and about Val's antipathy toward her. "So you see," she finished miserably, "there's nothing for me to do but resign."

Mr. Garth lit a cigarette, his eyes keen, alert. Then abruptly he said, "You're in love with this Scott, aren't you, my dear?"

"Of course not," she denied, too hastily.

He searched her eyes a moment, then got up. "Excuse me, a second, I'll be right back."

She was too miserable to watch where he went, or to care, only glad of the opportunity to be alone a moment to try and get her emotions in shape again.

When he returned, he said with a smile, "Let's dance and forget our troubles, shall we?"

She tried to obey, forcing a bright gayety, but after several dances she realized it wasn't any use. Each note of the music beat at her brain reminding her of Scott, of his quick, gay grin, his laughing eyes. And the thought that he was somewhere with Val tormented her until the pain in her heart was unbearable.

At last, she looked at Mr. Garth. "I'd like to go home now, please."

He glanced at his wrist watch. "If you insist," he said brightly. "But you'd better repair some of your make-up first. I'll meet you outside."

He was waiting under the marquee when she rejoined him. He looked at her face and nodded. "All glamour again," he said smiling, and motioned for an attendant to bring his cream-colored convertible.

WHEN THE car swung to a stop, he opened the door and seated her. She didn't look at the attendant at the wheel because suddenly her eyes blurred and she dabbed at them with her handkerchief.

Then she stiffened. The car was in motion and John Garth was still standing on the sidewalk. She jerked her head around and then she couldn't move. Scott was in the driver's seat.

She made a strangled sound and tried to open the door, but he caught her hand. "Sorry," he said, grinning down at her, "but this time you're stuck with me."

She stared at him, wide-eyed. "I don't understand—" she said.

"Neither did I," he answered, "until Mr. Garth telephoned me and told me that you intended to resign from the show." He chuckled. "I broke all the speed records getting over here."

Carol hung onto her reason somehow. "But this is Mr. Garth's car."

Scott nodded. "He's using mine. It just so happens that they're both cream-colored convertibles. That's why you didn't notice, I guess."

She forced her voice to come out evenly. "I still can't see why he should call you. Certainly my resignation shouldn't matter to you."

He appeared not to hear. He swung the car to the right, up a steep winding road.

Carol glanced ahead at the Hollywood hills and then back at Scott's handsome profile with its clean-cut, jutting jaw, and her heart began to hammer so hard she could scarcely breathe.

If he tries to kiss me, she thought wildly, I can't do anything but kiss him back. And I mustn't do that. I must remember that he's in love with Val Loring.

Through sheer will power she said stiffly, "Take me home, please, Scott. This has gone far enough."

He glanced around, his eyes glinting down into hers. "Don't be frightened, Bonnie Wee. I just wanted to show you Hollywood at night from one of these lovely hills."

His voice was so quiet and impersonal, she relaxed a little. And when he stopped the car on a high bluff and pointed to the lights below she forgot everything but the field of lights stretching to the distant horizon like a glimmering golden spider web.

"It's beautiful," she said breathlessly.

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"The most beautiful sight I ever saw."

"I knew you'd like it," he said softly. Then, without any warning, his arms went around her and his lips came down on hers insistently, demandingly.

She tried to struggle, but his arms were like steel bands around her and gradually she melted against him, her lips answering him kiss for kiss, the world turning to magic again.

Finally, he lifted his head and looked into her eyes. "And I thought you were in love with John Garth," he murmured softly.

Carol gazed up at him, realization suddenly dawning on her. "Val told you that. Today. Didn't she?"

He nodded. "She made me believe that was why he gave you the job as singer on the program." He stroked her hair. "That's why I was so miserable until John Garth called me tonight and explained things."

Carol laughed happily. "John Garth's like a father to me. I've known him all my life." She sobered suddenly, a swift pity for Val sweeping through her. "Val's in love with you, Scott," she said.

He shook his head. "She thinks she is, Bonnie Wee. But she can't really love anyone but herself, for any length of time, at least. She gave me a chance on the program, but when she made things so darned unpleasant for you, I was ready to resign."

Carol sat up straight. "That's why I must resign, Scott."

He held her tighter against his heart. "You won't have to resign, darling, and neither will I. We have a new producer, a man. He starts tomorrow."

Carol stared at him unbelievingly, and he smiled. "You see, this morning no one knew that Mr. Garth was outside the door listening to the rehearsal. He saw just how impossible Val made things for you. And, well, you're his home-town pride, and as his account is the most important the J. Harry Simpson Agency has, he insisted that they put on a new producer, or lose his account." He smiled. "They listened to reason, and we have a new producer."

"But Val won't have a job," Carol said, frowning.

Scott shook his head. "You don't have to feel sorry for Val. She's clever enough to get another show."

Carol smiled suddenly. "And I thought all the time that you were a Hollywood wolf."

He kissed the tip of her upturned nose. "I've had a few moments, Bonnie Wee." His voice went deep and husky, "But I was waiting for you all the time, my darling."

And as she snuggled close in his arms again she knew by the rhythmic beating of her heart against his, that she too had been waiting for Scott.

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The Bashful Wolf

By Blake Reed

Riley might have been quiet and shy but Janie soon discovered that he knew how to get what he wanted.

JANIE HALLET'S sedan came to a slow stop beside the four airline pilots standing by a car with a flat tire. Their thumbs were pointing toward LaGuardia Field. She had sworn never to give a hitchhiker a ride again after her experience with Bill Mackay, but, she reasoned, there was safety in numbers. Beside, they might miss their flights if someone didn't come to their rescue.

Her keen, blue eyes took them in at one glance. One of them looked particularly quiet and reserved. He had serious, gray eyes, dark hair and a full, sensitive mouth.

She said crisply, "Hop in, boys."

They thanked her. Then one of them said to the quiet looking boy, "You sit up front with the beautiful driver, Wolf."

Janie did a double take at that remark. The boy didn't seem to notice however. He got in beside her without a word while the others climbed into the rear seat and started shooting wise cracks at Janie. She froze them with a look in the rear vision mirror and reminded tartly, "Look, I'm doing you boys a favor. For comedy, I prefer Bob Hope."

"Good girl, that's telling them," the boy beside her murmured in a husky voice.

Janie threw him a grateful smile and his gray eyes lit up, for an instant. Then he looked away confused. She thought, Why he's actually bashful. The first pilot I've met who doesn't act as if he thought he could take over with one look.

Her heart could still drop at the memory of one pilot who had taken over, after hitching a ride to the airport. For three weeks Bill Mackay had rushed her off her feet, then he'd left town without so much as good-by. He was big, blonde, gay and enchanting; the kind of man who leaves a girl breathless and tongue-tied—and in love.

The three pilots were sitting quietly in their seats now. The boy beside her had taken out a letter and was reading it, his brow puckered in a frown.

As she stole a quick glance at him he looked up quickly and his eyes met her's. She looked back to the road just in time

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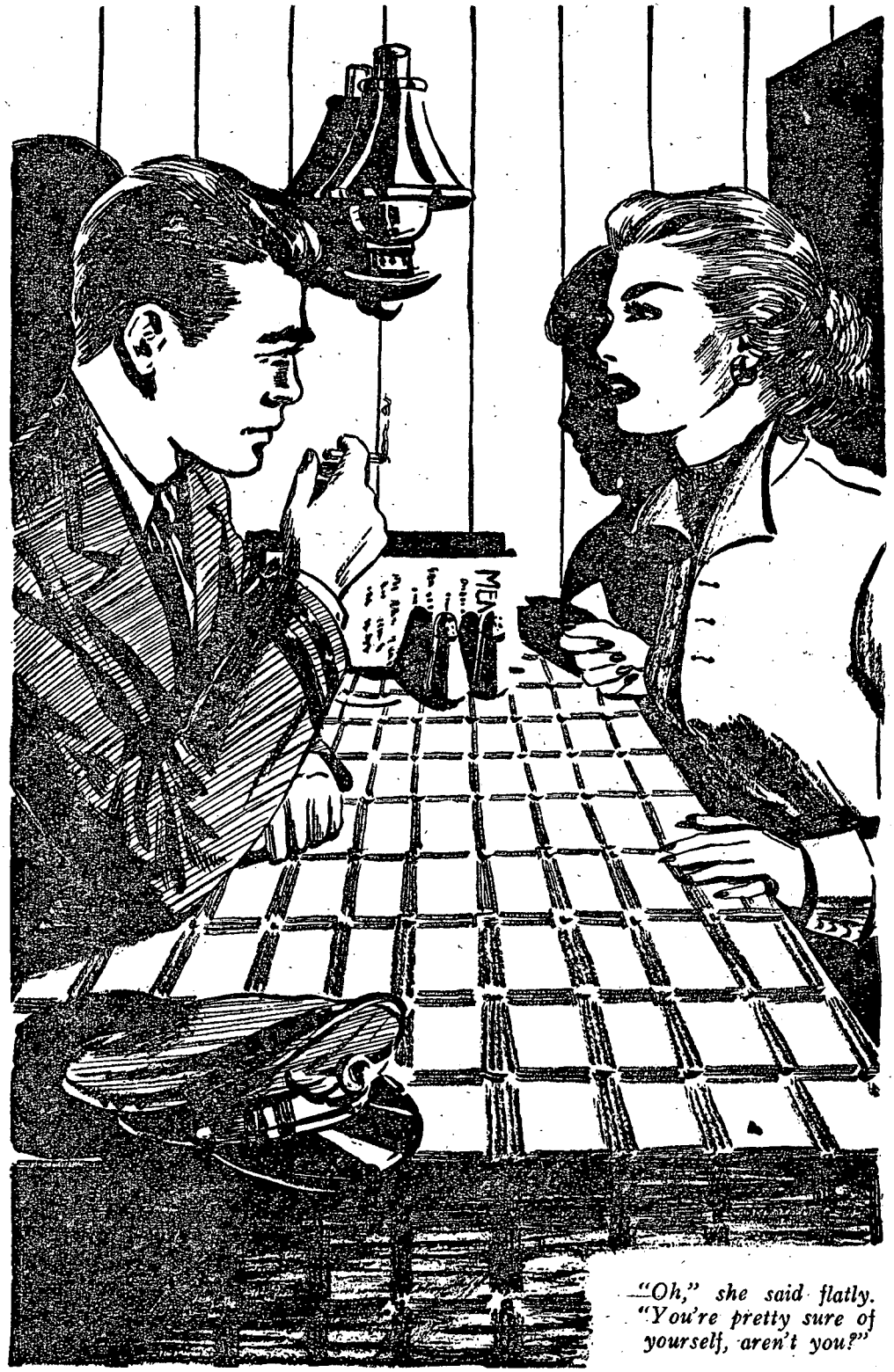

"Oh," she said flatly. "You're pretty sure of yourself, aren't you?"

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to dodge a beer truck that seemed to be trying to see how near it could come without taking off one of her fenders.

"Hey, watch it!" one of the pilots in the rear seat yelled. "I like beer but I don't fancy being dunked in it. These women drivers, they just can't keep their minds on the race. Maybe you'd better come back here with us, Wolf. You seem to be distracting the lady."

Her face flamed. Her hands were long and slender but they were capable on a steering wheel. Now the knuckles were strained from her angry grip. The man beside her reached over, patted one hand gently and counseled, "Take it easy, they don't mean any harm. They got that way during the war when you had to kid around to keep your nerves from doing tailspins."

"Louder, please, we can't hear you," the fresh pilot suggested. "And look, Wolf, don't start any of your commando tactics with our lives at stake. We didn't survive the war in one piece, to be annihilated in a jalopy."

"Jalopy!" Janie gasped. "I hope you always get a lift in such a good car. One more wise-crack and you can walk the rest of the way."

She turned sharply onto the Boulevard and the men swayed to one side, a look of affected fright on their faces.

JANIE NEVER would forget this stretch of road. Bill Mackay had kissed her for the first time, right beside this tree, a few feet ahead. These days she always put her foot on the gas and passed it fast, as if that would help her to forget.

Today, the car, instead of leaping ahead, sputtered and came to a sighing stop right at the tree. The men groaned and the fresh one exclaimed, "I wish I'd listened to my mother. She always warned me against red-headed women driving smooth running cars, that run out of gas on lonely roads. I, for one, refuse to kiss the driver. I'm faithful to my girl in Topeka—even if I haven't seen her in two years."

"Oh, pipe down, will you?" Janie exclaimed. "I'm not out of gas, and there isn't one of you I'd give a second look. I hate men; they're all smug and egotistical."

She followed up this tirade with a contemptuous look at them in the rear vision mirror. They grinned back at her as if they knew they'd finally thrown her for a loss. The Wolf was looking straight ahead, utterly oblivious. She thought in annoyance, What's wrong with him anyway? Doesn't he have any normal reactions at all? Imagine anyone calling him a Wolf!

Just then a truck drew up beside Janie's car and driver inquired, "Stuck, lady?"

"Yes," she snapped, "with four pilots. Will you take them to the airport, please?"

"Sure thing," the man agreed pleasantly. "And if you're out of gas—"

"I'm not," she insisted. "The motor is just a bit temperamental, I guess. I can fix it."

"The motor!" the fresh one cried. "It has a motor and she can fix it. Darn clever, these redheads. I wish we could stay and watch this, but we're due at the field in fifteen minutes."

They scrambled out of the car but the Wolf sat perfectly still. The men were laughing uproariously as they climbed into the rear of the truck. The fresh one yelled, "Nice going, Wolf. Want us to send you back some help from the field or can you handle it alone?"

He looked at them unruffled and replied, "I can handle it alone, I think." He spoke with an assurance that exasperated Janie.

"Will you go too, please?" she begged. "You're making me look ridiculous, and you'll be late."

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"I have plenty of time," he insisted blandly.

She had a queer feeling that she wasn't going to like this, at all. She'd heard about these quiet men. He probably didn't have that nickname, Wolf, for nothing. Well, just let him try out his routine on her. She knew how to handle him.

She reached into the compartment on the dash-board for her tool kit but the Wolf informed her casually, "You won't need that. It's just a disconnected wire under the dash." There was a twinkle in his eyes now that made her face feel hot.

He leaned over, connected the wire. She stepped on the ignition and the car purred again, like a contented cat. She sat looking at him, dazed, her mouth open before she accused, "You knew about that disconnected wire all the time. Why didn't you tell me?"

He grinned annoyingly. "It was practically dangling on your knee," he advised, "I thought—" He stopped short as she glared at him. He protested, "Well, anyway, it served them right. They were fresh and getting your goat. Say, would you mind driving me over to Sam's diner, instead of the field? I'm a bit hungry and the hamburgers and coffee are good there. Maybe you'll join me?"

Very subtle, Janie thought, but I'm not falling for it.

"I'll drive you over but I can't stop. I have a date," she said primly to him.

"Never mind," he answered resignedly.

"But if you're hungry," she protested.

He said quietly, "I've been hungry before and got over it. Just let me off at the field, please.

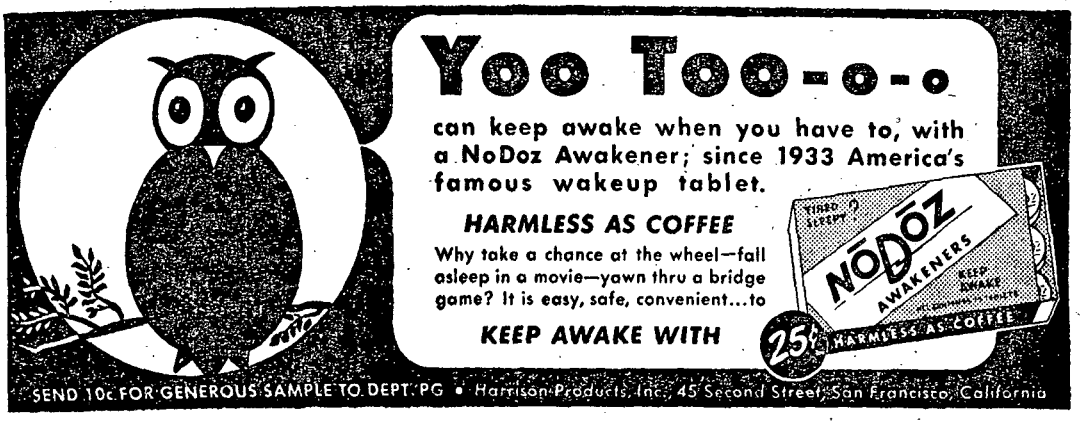
SHE HATED the way he dismissed the whole thing. She felt as if she'd failed him, somehow. Against her better judgment, she headed for Sam's diner, expecting every minute he would remark about it but he didn't. When she drove into the lot beside the diner he instructed, "Now, wait, I'll bring something out to you. It'll take only a minute."

"Never mind, I'll go in with you," she replied grudgingly.

He helped her out of the car and as they walked to the diner, his hand stayed at her elbow lightly and it didn't feel the least bit unpleasant. He was tall and compactly built. There was something about him that rated a second glance.

When they'd ordered, he concentrated on eating, looking at her as impersonally as if she were a picture on the wall. Somehow, it irked her. Most men gave out with a line about the blue of her eyes, her beautiful red hair and those lashes that a man could hang his hat on, to say nothing of her poem of a figure.

"Eat your hamburger, it's getting cold," he reminded, interrupting her reverie. To her surprise she answered meekly, "I'm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not hungry, I just came in to keep you company."

He smiled fleetingly and said, "That's very nice. I appreciate your thoughtfulness."

He went right back to eating his hamburger again. He evidently believed that food and conversation didn't mix. The silence made her nervous and to her amazement she blurted, "What's your name and why do they call you, 'Wolf?' "

He said offhandedly, "The name is Riley Shaw and those Joes put everything in reverse."

He took a swallow of coffee and she persisted, "Meaning, I suppose, that you're not a wolf." She wondered why on earth she pursued the subject unless it was that she wanted to make him talk.

He put his coffee cup down, lighted two cigarettes and handed her one before he replied, "If you mean by 'wolf', do I whistle at girls and back them into corners—no. I believe you gain your objective quicker by not running after it. It just falls into your lap, if it's supposed to."

"Oh," she said flatly. "You're pretty sure of yourself, aren't you?"

His eyes narrowed at her through the smoke of his cigarette. He nodded affirmatively. "Of course, it's the only way to be unless you want to go out on a limb. Take you, for instance. You didn't mean a word of what you said about hating men. No girl does. It isn't natural and you weren't the least bit convincing. You just weren't sure of yourself so you popped off with the first thing that came to your mind."

"Well, thanks," she said dryly. She started to get up but he put his hand out and touched hers. It made her tingle, just a trifle and it annoyed her.

"Now don't act injured," he said. "That's a pose, too. You're very intelligent looking and rather attractive. A man expects a girl to talk the way she looks."

"Well, thanks again," she echoed, realizing she was repeating herself but somehow she was at a loss for words. Rather attractive, indeed! He should hear Bill Mackay rave about her looks.

That wasn't much consolation though, for Bill had said a lot of things he probably hadn't meant. This wolf in reverse at least would mean anything he said, even if he wasn't extravagant with his compliments. And it was sound advice to talk the way one looked.

SHE DECIDED to remember that. She didn't like him one darned bit, but she did admire his philosophy. She walked ahead of him out to the car, a sudden feeling of poise and superiority flooding through her.

To her surprise as she got behind the wheel, instead of getting in beside her, he climbed into the rear seat, took out that letter again and frowned as he reread it. She wondered if it were from a girl. The stationery looked feminine. She caught herself wondering, too, what it would be like to kiss such a complacent male, and her thoughts tinged her face scarlet.

Just then they came into the lane leading to the airport. It was jammed with traffic and the red signal was on. She braked the car, her eyes on the rear vision mirror.

Riley looked up, smiled vaguely and said, "Guess I'll hop out here. You may be held up for some time."

"What's the hurry?" she asked edgily. "You won't gain much time walking."

"Okay," he agreed. "It's nice to know you don't want to get rid of me. I thought you were angry."

"I don't know you well enough to have any sort of emotion about you," she insisted airily.

His eyes twinkled. He leaned forward swiftly, pressed his lips against her cheek and murmured, "Anytime you want to know me better, just drop me a line."

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He started to get out of the car just as the light changed. She started forward with a jerk and he collapsed in an undignified position in the rear seat. He looked at her wrathfully in the mirror and muttered, "Baby, you have the instincts of a Borgia."

"And you have a very moth-eaten line," she retorted. "Things just drop in your lap—well, not this time, brother. Come on, get out. It's been nice meeting you."

She was seething inwardly and knew she must look flustered but he was calm now and smiling. He even waved goodby to her, with airy friendliness.

Just then a voice she would have known anywhere, called out, "Hey, Gorgeous, hello."

Her first impulse was to get away fast but Bill Mackay came up beside the car before she could do that. She had rehearsed a dozen times the way she'd freeze him when she saw him again but Riley was standing a few feet away, looking as if he couldn't believe his eyes.

"Hello, darling," she said too effusively, flashing her gayest smile. "Hop in, I'll drive you back to town," she invited carelessly.

"Can't," he replied, "I'm going the other way, but I'm free tomorrow night. How's about dinner and some dancing at our favorite spot. Say, seven-thirty?"

"I'd love it," she agreed.

Bill's smile was lightning in his tanned, attractive face. "I've lots to talk to you about, Gorgeous," he confided.

Janie stole a glance at Riley, out of the corner of her eye. He was grinning widely.

Horns tooted impatiently behind her. She started the car, saying loudly to Bill as she drove off, "See you tomorrow night, Bill."

Riley was talking to another pilot, now as if he'd forgotten they'd ever met. Well, that's all right with me, she assured herself. I really should be glad it happened this way for if he hadn't been watching I'd have snubbed Bill and that wouldn't be acting the way I look—according to Riley.

Try as she would though, she couldn't seem to get up the proper enthusiasm about the date with Bill. Her emotions were too muddled. She missed that breathless feeling she used to have about him, and she knew why. Riley Shaw had made her feel she had to weigh every word before she spoke. She'd probably be terrible company, now, for the dynamic Bill.

Even her new, toffee-colored wool suit with purple accessories and cartwheel hat didn't make her feel like the best dressed girl in town, tonight. Just the same, she wished Riley could see her.

SHE WAS right on time to meet Bill at the Wayside Inn. It was a circular, glass-enclosed room, on the Turnpike, attractively decorated in violet and gray. There was a hot band, rum swizzles that gave one a nice glow and delicious fried chicken. Bill was a marvelous dancer, too, so the evening could be pleasant if she would just make up her mind it was going to be.

When Bill was fifteen minutes late she began to lose her assurance. At eight o'clock she was about to leave in seething fury when he came in, accompanied by a violet eyed, dark-haired girl.

Sensing her anger, he apologized profusely. "Sorry, Gorgeous, but Vita's train was late. She's a friend of Riley Shaw's. He couldn't meet her so he asked me if I would as she's a friend of mine, too. He'll be along at nine o'clock. Vita Knight, meet Janie Hallet."

Vita's voice wasn't anything like her personality. It was soft and drawling. "Charmed, I'm sure, Janie. Hope you'll forgive me for making Bill late. I guess it was impulsive of me, barging in on Riley like this but I just had to see that boy again."

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Janie smiled weakly and acknowledged the introduction. Bill explained, "Riley can't wait to see you, either. He was plenty upset that he couldn't meet your train."

I'll bet, Janie thought wrathfully as Bill guided them to a table. Why did he have to ask Bill to meet her? Why not someone else, unless he was deliberately trying to upset her date?

She tried desperately to be friendly but Vita was one of those girls who made every other one seem like a wall flower. Her purple suit, that matched her eyes perfectly, made Janie feel like a burglar, trying to wear the color. She was sure she never wanted to see anything purple again.

Bill ordered drinks and beamed all over the place. Janie had once thought he had the most attractive smile in the world. Tonight she wished he'd stop smiling constantly. It was monotonous.

They were sipping their drink when the music began. Janie didn't miss the quick look Vita gave Bill and the way she started swaying to the music.

"Go ahead and dance," she prompted, feeling very generous.

"Oh, I couldn't think of taking your man," Vita protested. "I'll just wait until my little old wolf gets here. He dances divinely."

Bill chuckled, "I always get a bang out of that nickname we pinned on Riley. He's anything but a wolf!"

"That's what I love about him," Vita purred. "He's so backward and naive. I practically have to do all the courting myself."

"What!" Janie exclaimed. It just slipped out. Bill and Vita looked at her in surprise. Vita asked Janie, "Do you know Riley?"

"I met him yesterday," she replied offhandedly.

"Don't you like him?" Vita persisted in asking.

"I hadn't thought about it," Janie faltered, feeling as if she was about to blow a fuse.

"I didn't at first," Vita confided. "He was so aloof but he has a charm that sneaks up on you. I didn't realize until after he'd left Richmond how much I really went for him. I wrote him a letter and now I'm feeling panicky about facing him. I'd just die if he thought me forward."

"I'll bet," Janie muttered to herself, then decided that it must have been the letter he was frowning about. He probably never intended to meet Vita. He'd just passed the buck to Bill to spoil her date. He probably wouldn't even show up at nine o'clock.

Vita was swaying so vigorously to the music that Janie insisted, "Go ahead and dance with Bill. I don't feel in the mood myself, really."

Bill gave her a funny look and said to Vita, "Okay, let's not waste the music."

JANIE WATCHED them glide around the floor as if they were used to each other's dancing. For a girl who was in love with one man, Vita seemed to be acting very cozy with Bill.

She jumped as a voice said, "Don't look so annoyed. It's not becoming."

She hated the way she seemed to collapse inside at the sight of Riley Shaw. To cover her confusion, she complained, "Why shouldn't I be annoyed, having my date all messed up?"

"What's messed up about it," he asked easily. "The evening is still young. Now, wipe that petulant look off your face and I'll dance with you."

"No thanks," she refused tartly.

He ignored that, drew her to her feet and she had to fall in step with him, or stumble. Strangely enough, it was far too pleasant dancing with him.

When they danced by Vita and Bill, Vita spied him and squealed, "Riley,

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honey." Janie could have strangled her.

Vita practically dragged Riley away from her and gave him a long, lingering kiss, then insisted on finishing the dance with him. Janie was only half conscious of exchanging partners until Bill chided, "Trying to get a rise out of me, Gorgeous?"

"What do you mean?" she asked inanely.

"Thought you didn't know Riley very well. You two were dancing together as if you had a secret understanding."

"What difference does it make to you?" she retorted and was instantly sorry. She hadn't meant to act as if she cared that he had walked out on her without a word but here she was saying the wrong thing again.

Bill laughed teasingly and held her closer. "It makes a lot of difference, Gorgeous. I thought of you all the time I was in Richmond. I'd have written you but I never put anything in writing, I figured I could explain when I saw you again why I ran out without a word. Have I been too sure of myself, thinking I'm the main one with you?"

"I really don't know," she confessed. "Everything is so confused tonight. Do we have to spend the evening with Riley and Vita?"

Bill chuckled softly as his arm tightened around her possessively. "Vita will take care of that. She wants to be alone with Riley, too."

As they walked to the table, Janie saw that Vita and Riley were there. She was talking rapidly. He seemed to be listening attentively, but he stood up and it made Janie feel smothered the way his eyes wrapped her up and put her in his pocket.

Vita immediately suggested, "We've barged in on Janie's date with Bill, honey. Don't you think we should leave now?"

"Nonsense," Riley insisted with calm assurance. "They don't want to be alone." His eyes flicked Bill fleetingly, then came to rest on Janie and she flashed.

"Speak for yourself, will you?"

He laughed and shook his head indulgently, explaining, "Janie's always saying things she doesn't mean. It's the red hair, I guess."

"But I do mean it," she insisted, furious now at his high-handed attitude. "Bill and I do want to be alone."

"Now, sweetheart," Riley counseled, "be yourself."

"Sweetheart?" Vita echoed. "You said you hardly knew Riley, Janie."

"Well, that's partly true," he explained. "It was one of those quick things, Vita. The moment we met we knew it was the real thing."

"Then why does she want to be alone with Bill?" she asked plaintively.

"She doesn't," Bill cut in angrily. "I get the score now. That letter you wrote to Riley mixed up the romance temporarily, I guess. I recall now that Janie looked plenty burned up when she brought Riley to the field, yesterday. She probably dated me to get even and then the Wolf here got the bright idea of asking me to meet you, Vita. Looks like we're in on a rain check. Let's scram."

"All right," Vita agreed. She didn't look nearly as unhappy as she should about the whole thing.

AFTER THEY'D left, Janie said scathingly, "When things drop into your lap that you don't want, you don't care what methods you use to get rid of them, do you? You even lie—deliberately."

"You can be an awful heel, telling the truth, sometimes, Janie," he said softly, "Please believe me, I—"

"Believe you?" she cried contemptuously. "Not in a million years. I loathe you and I hope I never see you again!"

She tried to get up but he reached out and stopped her. His eyes were smouldering, his voice tight as he asked bluntly:

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"Are you in love with Bill?"

"I don't consider that's any of your business," she retorted loftily.

"Well, you'd better consider it," he advised. "If you want to catch him, you're going to need my help."

"Your help?" she gasped. "How?"

"By taking Vita off his neck. She's had more experience playing one man against another, than you have, I imagine. In the clinches, she could win!"

"Your modesty is refreshing, but since it's you she's in love with, I hardly think she'll settle for Bill." She added, feeling suddenly very wise, "Besides love isn't merchandise. You don't take a substitute when you can't get first choice!"

"Very profound but eye-wash," he said ungallantly. "And let's get the record straight. Vita is after Bill, not me. But she knows he can't be chased into a corner. He has to be finessed. She figured me for a docile dummy she could use to turn the trick."

"Why didn't you tell her that instead of involving me, making me look ridiculous in front of Bill?"

He looked at her speculatively before he replied, "I thought you made that date with Bill to get a rise out of me. I didn't dream you'd fall for his type but now that I see I've been wrong, I'll do anything to square things. I'll give Vita a whirl while she's here. I'll even—"

"Don't bother," she cut in indignantly. "When I need your help to get a man, I'll let you know!"

To her amazement he leaned forward swiftly, kissed her hard on the lips. "That's a promise. I'll be waiting to hear from you."

He signaled for the waiter to pay the check. She jumped up and dashed out to her car, then couldn't start it. That wire was dangling again. She was getting nowhere with it when he joined her, asking nonchalantly, "May I help you?"

She backed away from the car with an impatient gesture and he had it fixed in an instant. She thanked him and asked haltingly, "May I give you a lift?"

He smiled and countered, "No, but I'll ride home with you to keep you company."

"Then how will you get home?" she asked.

He got in beside her and advised, "Don't worry about me, I always get home." He settled back comfortably, closed his eyes and didn't open them or speak until she turned into her driveway. Then he sat up and asked, "Where are we and where can I get a cab? I didn't realize you lived so far out."

"We're in Floral Park and I'll phone for a cab for you," she offered grudgingly.

"That's big of you," he teased, catching the note in her voice. "Nice place you have here," he said as she unlocked the door.

"It's my brother's house," she told him, for no good reason. "Come inside while I phone for a cab."

"Thanks, I'd like to meet your brother."

"He won't be home until later."

"Well, I can wait, I have nothing to do."

"Well, I have," she said coldly. She led him to the den, saying, "There's the phone. The number is—"

JUST THEN the door bell peeled loudly. He grinned and said, "Maybe that's your brother."

"He works until eleven," she replied. "It's probably Bill Mackay and if so, you won't need a cab, you can drive back with him!"

She turned swiftly without waiting to get his reaction, but she felt she'd scored a bulls-eye. If it was Bill, she would show them both she couldn't be tossed around!

When she opened the door and saw Vita standing there, she was completely nonplussed.

"I'm going back to Richmond in the

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morning," Vita said excitedly. "I couldn't leave without an explanation to you."

Janie invited her into the living room then excused herself to summon Riley. This was an explanation he should be in on, but to her surprise, he wasn't in the den. She ran to the kitchen and sure enough, the back door was unlocked. Angrily she turned the key, muttering, "Coward." Then she rejoined Vita in the living room.

Vita talked hurriedly, "Janie, I'm not in love with Riley. It's Bill I came up here to see. We were engaged, then had a quarrel and broke off. He came back here and met you. Meanwhile I met Riley and dated him a few times but it was always Bill with me. When he came back to Richmond, I tried to make up with him again but he told me about you and said he thought he was love with you. Well, I know Bill. He's fickle but I'm so crazy about him I can overlook his faults. I was sure that if I came up here, where you were, he'd make his mind up about which one of us he really cared for. I wrote to Riley to meet me because he's so regular, I knew he'd play along when I explained that I was just trying to see if I could make Bill jealous. I didn't know about you and Riley until Bill told me you were in love with him."

As she closed the door, after Vita left, Janie saw Riley standing in the kitchen doorway, a sheepish smile on his face.

"How did you get back in here?" she demanded.

He held up a pair of pliers and said, "You should put a bolt on that kitchen door, it's a cinch to open."

"Why, you—" she began.

"Sneak?" he supplied, "Well, maybe I am but I didn't really mean to be. I left when I thought it was Bill because I might have poked him in the nose, for luck. Then when I saw Vita through the window I was curious to know what she was doing here. When I found the kitchen door locked I used the pliers."

"Why didn't you come in the front door?" she asked scathingly. She added, "Eavesdropper!"

"I thought of that but afterward I was glad I sneaked in, when I heard what Vita said to you. I realized you might have been so embarrassed you'd deny you loved me. You're such a one for saying things you don't mean."

As he came toward her she protested, "I don't love you. I don't even know you."

"You will," he said confidently. "I can wait."

As he drew her into his arms she struggled briefly, then gave in with a deep sigh, "You wolf!"

"Your wolf," he corrected.

After he'd kissed her breathless she decided that wolf or no wolf, he wouldn't be too hard to tame.

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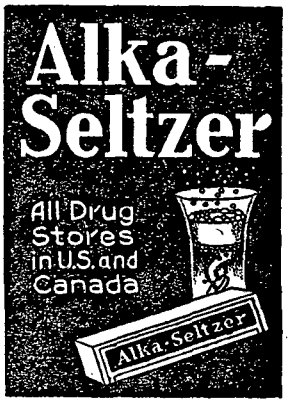

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Lady with Ambitions

By Jeri Sylvester

BETTY LANE sat behind the horseshoe-shaped desk facing the entrance, and reflected that perhaps the employment agency had been right. Probably she could keep this job, without being fired. There certainly weren't many men here and the few who were had their noses buried deep in books.

The telephone at her elbow tinkled and Betty picked it up. "Martinsdale Public Library."

"Could you tell me how many cats James Mason owns?" a deep voice asked courteously.

Betty jumped. "What?"

"Cats. How many? James Mason."

In the magazine reading room, Miss Adger lifted her head alertly and then scurried across the marble floor. "What is it?"

"Somebody wants to know about James Mason's cats."

"Oh, so that's who it is," Miss Adger said grimly, and reached for the phone and barked into it, "Now look here, Stew Towers, I've told you time and again, this library has a reference service but we're not running a free emergency department for contest hounds. I suppose that's a question on the radio and you're hoping your phone number will be called for the answer. I just hope it is called and you don't know. And you stop bothering us with your silly questions."

Miss Adger slammed the phone down, breathing heavily through her nose. "I should have warned you, Betty. Just a minute. I want to show you something."

She scurried back toward her little private office and, watching her go, Betty wondered if she would look like that in twenty years. Miss Adger was long and thin and she wore brown dresses that somehow were always the wrong shade for her brown hair and she walked as if her feet hurt.

Betty sighed heavily. At least, she thought forlornly, if she did look like that, it would solve her chronic unemployment problem. Everybody had made it pretty plain this was her last chance. But she still didn't see how it was her fault that she had lasted only two weeks as Mr. Baird's secretary. Even Mrs. Baird had been very nice when she fired her. She was sure Betty was a nice, sweet child, Mrs. Baird had said, and she would give her the best possible reference. Unfortunately Mr. Baird was fat, foolish and forty, with a marked weakness for cute straw-

She was the most beautiful girl Stew had ever met—and the most unscrupulous.

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She found herself staying dreamily in the circle of his arms, while time slipped away.

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berry blondes with big brown eyes, so Mrs. Baird just couldn't let Betty go on working in his office.

She had lasted only one week at the bank. The personnel manager had been very nice. Betty's work was just fine, she explained, but unfortunately the bank employed a large number of men and their work hadn't been so fine since Betty had been there. Betty was a distraction and the bank couldn't afford to have distractions around.

THIS JOB at the public library, working from nine to five one week, and twelve to nine the next, was her last chance. Martinsdale was a fairly large town but small enough that word got around if a girl lost three jobs in quick succession.

If only she were engaged or even in love, Betty often thought, life would have been much simpler. She dated a lot and she had fun, but all the boys she knew seemed about as exciting as cup custard. Even the library was better than being married to one of them.

Miss Adger came back and slammed a half page newspaper clipping down on the desk. "Read that."

Betty caught her breath sharply. There, she thought, staring down wide-eyed at the picture, was the kind of man she had always dreamed of meeting.

That face had something more than mere handsomeness, charm and character. It was in the one-sided grin and the twinkle in the eyes that looked as if they might be gray. And the nose, which obviously had been broken at some time, gave the whole lean grinning face a rakish, jaunty air, and the unruly black hair with a defiant curl to it.

Miss Adger tapped a long finger on the clipping. "Stew Towers," she said disapprovingly. "He could have had any job he wanted when he got out of college. Football All-American. Played basketball too. Just missed Phi Beta Kappa. Named most popular man in his class. And what did he do with all that?"

Too late, Betty realized the question was purely rhetorical. She had already glanced at the headline and said, awed, "Makes about twenty thousand a year winning contest prizes."

"Contests," Miss Adger sniffed. "Any man who is a man, works at a job and brings home a regular pay envelope. That man's never held a job in his life."

"But most people who have jobs don't make that much," Betty protested.

"It's the principle of the thing. A man should work."

"Oh."

"Now you'll see him around here and let me warn you," Miss Adger said impressively. "He knows his way around this library and how to find what he wants. Don't you let him work you into doing his research for him. He can find his own references. The only service we give is when he needs one of the rarities we keep in locked cases. Then we open the case. That's all. And you remember that."

Betty glanced at the picture again incredulously. What could be wrong with Stew, she wondered, shocked. Miss Adger obviously disliked him intensely.

"Yes, Miss Adger," she murmured.

Miss Adger shook her brown head discouragedly. "I hope you do. Why do you think you got this job, when you've really had no library training? Because the last three little flipperty-jibbets I've had on the checkout desk couldn't remember that. Stew Towers has a very distracting way with him when it comes to girls."

Betty instantly felt a fierce kinship for Stew Towers. She understood his problem completely. Just in time, she remembered that she had a problem, too, and what her family would say if she lost this job. She immediately tried to look like the kind of girl who could never be distracted and spent all her spare time read-

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ing magazines full of black print and no illustrations.

"I'll remember," she promised solemnly.

But when she got off work that evening at nine o'clock, Betty stopped at the corner newsstand and bought a couple of magazines before she caught the bus to ride home. The kind of magazines full of advertisements for contests. She flipped through all the back pages and totaled up some hasty figures on her fingers and felt slightly breathless. She also felt a new respect for Stew Towers. That man knew what he was doing.

THE NEXT morning, she put on her blue suit. She always had liked that suit, even though she had been wearing it the day Mrs. Baird took a long final look at her and decided she definitely must be fired. The blue brought out the red glints in her hair and somehow made her eyes a deeper, warmer brown in her piquant face with the cute, tipped-up nose.

She recognized Stew the minute he walked in the library. She looked at him. All at once, her breath caught and her heart began to race. Because he didn't have gray eyes. They were green, a bright clear seagreen in bronzed face.

Then she stiffened. So he had green eyes! So what? This man had lost three girls their jobs, she reminded herself grimly. She wasn't going to make it four.

He walked over to the desk and grinned down at her. "Hello. You're new."

"Yes," she admitted cautiously. That did not come under the heading of reference information. "I am."

"Got anything good and new and different today on the general subject of syrups, maple, corn, synthetic or otherwise?"

She shook her bright head violently but she knew which contest he was talking about. "You'll find the subject files over in the west corner," she said primly.

"Skunked again," he murmured dolefully. "Old Auntie Adger must have warned you about me."

She nodded silently.

"You know, that woman doesn't like me," he confided. "She thinks it's immoral or something to have fun and make money at the same time. Maybe because she's never had either fun or money. And I have to use the library to get the technical dope I need for my entries."

"Tough," Betty said with crisp scorn. "I suppose those three girls who were fired because of you got a lot of fun and money out of it?"

"They got other jobs and now they don't have to practically live with Auntie Adger," he said cheerfully.

But, Betty reminded herself with an effort that astounded her, there wouldn't be any more jobs for her if she lost this one.

"So be a honey, honey," he drawled blandy. "In your spare time around this cheerful little tomb, see if you can dig me up any new and different angles on syrup. Honest, I've got to connect on this one. I need a new car. Tried and tried and missed on every car last year. You should see the old jalopy I'm driving."

"I don't even have a jalopy to drive," she said, looking straight into the seagreen eyes that did such startling things to her pulse. "And never will I get fired. So scram and do your own research."

"Naughty, naughty." He grinned. "Scram. What kind of talk is that for a librarian? Behave or I'll tell Auntie Adger on you."

"She'd probably give me a raise," Betty said and turned her back on him.

THEN SHE simply sat and pretended to sort cards for filing. Because inwardly she was in a state of complete confusion and turmoil, a tumult that made her heart ache just a little for something that never had been and never could be.

Simply seeing Stew's picture had been

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enough to make her wear the blue suit, but in person— She whistled inwardly in a ladylike way. She had better not think about him in person.

Because he had never done a real day's work in his life, and probably never would. What work he did, he was perfectly capable of trying to charm some dopey girl into doing for him. And losing her job in the process.

She set her jaw angrily. So he had taken her for a dope too, silly enough to work herself into a headache and out of a pay envelope just for one of his one-sided smiles. He was a conceited jerk and someday she'd tell him so.

Rage boiled up in her until she completely lost that feeling of kinship. Stew distracted her on purpose.

She glanced scornfully at him bending over the card files in the west corner and all at once, her eyes widened. She remembered those stupendous totals she had added up last night. She remembered the pictures of those shining new cars in the contest advertisements.

She jumped up and got the current magazine article index and dived into it, searching feverishly. If Stew could win twenty thousand dollars a year, she certainly could win just one car. And he could go right on driving his old jalopy.

A half hour later, Miss Adger leaned across the desk and said suspiciously, "What are you doing, Betty?"

Betty jumped guiltily. But she had a story ready. "Looking up some stuff for my little sister in high school. She has to write a couple of term papers."

For the next week, Stew was in the library every day and all day. Several times, he looked at Betty and half started toward her desk. But she just raised her chin and glared, and he turned right around.

She went on searching through the index and reading technical articles until her head ached. Never, she swore fervently, would she enter another contest after she won this one. Then she found it, in an obscure journal for dietitians. She read it over and over. The angle was new and startling and different. But simple. And perfect. Without a single pang of conscience, she hid the journal where Stew could never find it and went to work.

She chewed up half a dozen pencils and a hundred sheets of paper. She read the contest rules over and over. Then she threw her last pencil stub away in disgust and faced it. She needed help and advice from somebody who knew contests. If anybody knew contests, it was Stew.

If you do what you have in mind, her conscience warned, that makes you no better than Stew. Nonsense, she told herself, fiercely. She would simply be evening scores for what he had done to her three predecessors on the checkout desk.

That car was a beauty, and her only reason for doing this. The odd little ache which had never quite left her heart since the moment she looked into Stew's eyes and realized they were green had nothing to do with it.

SHE PUT on the blue suit again the next morning. Then she waited, with her pulse jumping crazily, for Stew to arrive. He settled down in the reference room, with a pile of books at his elbow. He looked tired and a little discouraged, she noticed, the ache in her heart sharpening suddenly. But she shook her head briskly and pushed the feeling down.

Nobody needed to feel sorry for him. He could well take care of himself and did. At anybody's expense, except his. Only this time, the tables were going to be turned. He was going to furnish the information.

Betty waited until Miss Adger went down to get something out of the newspaper stacks in the basement. Then she went over and slipped into the the chair beside Stew.

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"How you doing?" she whispered.

His green eyes widened in frank amazement. "What is this? A spring thaw in February? I don't believe it. It isn't natural."

"I had to make an impression on Miss Adger," she said impatiently. "Now I've made it. See?"

"Oh," he said thoughtfully. All at once, that one-sided grin flashed. "In that case, when do you get off work? Nine? How about meeting me? We could drop in at the Crescent Room or the Patio for a couple of hours."

"Somebody might see us."

Stew nodded his dark head and considered. "The Ringaround would be perfect but—"

"Tomorrow night," she broke in, knowing instantly what he meant. "I'll bring a long dress with me and change here before I leave."

Then she hastily slipped away and barely in time. Miss Adger came upstairs not thirty seconds after she got back to her desk.

THE RINGAROUND would be perfect, she thought, anticipation tingling in her veins. She would have been too terrified to concentrate at the Crescent Room or the Patio, because everybody who ever came into the library knew about the feud between Stew and Miss Adger. Someone would have been sure to have seen them together and reported it.

But the Ringaround was far enough out of town and expensive enough to guarrantee that the people who went there would hardly use a public library. The food was excellent, the music always smooth and perfect and the decorations stunning, the walls covered with coral and green and gold circus murals.

And going there required a long dress. But she could roll her gold jersey into a paper sack without wrinkling it and then hide it in her locker behind the newspaper stacks and change and slip out the basement door so Miss Adger wouldn't see her. It would be simple enough.

Just the same, all the next day, she kept getting cold chills every time she thought what might happen if Miss Adger happened to look in that locker. Betty was so nervous she was shivering as she changed, and her hands shook and fumbled with the wide blue velvet belt. Finally she tossed her coat over her shoulders and ran for the basement door and out of it and tumbled into Stew's car, waiting outside.

"Let's go," she cried. "Quick. Before Miss Adger comes out."

"The getaway." Stew chuckled. "I never knew a date could be so much fun. Practically as exciting as robbing a bank."

Just as profitable, too, for me, Betty thought smugly. Any man loved to talk about his business, but Stew had no idea

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how much talking he was going to do.

But somehow, once they got to the Ringaround, the music was even smoother than she remembered. So they danced. They might have been dancing together for years, she thought with amazement. She had never before danced with anyone like this. So she simply found herself staying dreamily in the circle of his arms while the time slipped away in a glow of shimmering happiness.

Once or twice, she tried to remind herself that she had serious business on her mind. But her mind wouldn't stay on it. Because it was so lovely to be in the circle of Stew's arms, with the soft love music flowing all around them, and his broad shoulder close to her cheek. She had never known anything like this golden glow and somehow she didn't want to break the magic spell.

Then, when they went back to their table during an intermission, he said moodily, "I suppose I could, but I don't like it."

"Like what?"

"The idea. Something along the lines of 'Syrup smooth as a hit tune, flowing from a top name band.' But I don't like it."

The golden glow shattered into a million pieces around Betty's feet and a sharp pang tore at her heart. Then her soft mouth set. She was a silly sentimental idiot, she thought bitterly. Letting herself drift into a romantic dream in Stew's arms. But not him. His mind, as always, was strictly on contests. And hers should be.

She leaned forward, a dangerous glint in her brown eyes. "Tell me how you do it," she invited. "I mean, all the little tricks a professional like you knows, and the average person who enters a contest never dreams of considering."

"Well, for instance, a lot of entries get thrown out because the rules haven't been followed." he said. "That's elementary."

FOR AN HOUR, she listened, jotting down mental notes. But she was astounded that her mind could function so efficiently. Because her whole being was tied up in a tight knot of rage. Listen to the conceited jerk sound off, she jeered inwardly, even while she was thinking the next instant that this was exactly the information she needed.

Deep inside her, deeper even than the rage, was another feeling, an emotion she tried to ignore. For if she ever admitted it existed, she might have to admit, too, that she had fallen a little in love for the first time in her life and had her heart broken the next instant.

Which was obviously absurd. A girl couldn't fall in love on one date, especially with a man she didn't even like and would probably never date again.

He was still giving her tips and angles when they left the Ringaround and all during the drive home.

Then, as they walked up the steps of her front porch, he laughed suddenly. "Why didn't you shut me up? I've done nothing but talk business all evening. Of course, it is the business I love."

"So I noticed," she snapped and then said hastily and sincerely, "But I was interested."

"Don't tell me you have brains as well as beauty," he drawled softly and leaned closer to her, studying her face in the silver moonlight. "You know, you're very beautiful."

Then she was in his arms and his dark head bent to hers. She should do something to stop this, she thought, but her mind was whirling dizzily. One part said to do something, but another part knew she only wanted to stay there in his arms and feel his lips touch hers. She knew she could stay there forever.

When he kissed her, it seemed to her that the whole world stopped and held its breath for an instant. Everything stopped. Everything else vanished. Only the kiss

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was real and the golden glow was all around her again, deepening into a star-shot ecstasy that shook her heart with its beauty. Only the mad pulsing of her heart and Stew's kisses existed. They were everything.

"See you tomorrow?" he whispered against her bright hair.

Betty couldn't speak. She just nodded.

"I'll be in about one," he said. "By the way, there's one issue of the Dietetics Journal that I can't find, and there's an article in it I'd like to read."

"What?" she gasped.

"Find it for me, will you, honey?" he said casually.

She wrenched herself out of his arms and stood glaring at him, breathing stormily. Fool, fool, fool, she raged at herself. All he wanted, and all he had ever wanted, was to distract her into doing his work for him. And she had fallen for it. Oh, how she had fallen.

"What do you think I am?" she cried. "A stupe like those other girls? I'm not going to lose my job for you."

"Auntie Adger wins again," he said resignedly. "The thaw is over, and the freeze is back."

Her eyes narrowed dangerously. Stew was completely mistaken. She was bubbling and seething inwardly with rage. Her fingers twitched ominously and then, before she even realized what she was going to do, she did it. She slapped him twice, stingingly, once on each cheek.

"I'm sorry," he said rather formally. "But I have a rule. If anyone hits me, I hit back."

He tapped her smartly, with two fingers only, across each cheek. She choked and reeled back. He had hit her, actually hit her. She touched her cheek, so shocked she still couldn't believe it.

"Now we're even?" he asked gently.

She got her voice back with a rush. "You bet we're even," she cried, and whirled and ran into the house.

She hated him. She hated him. She hated herself for having kissed him. She could hardly sleep for hating them both.

BY MORNING, she told herself to be sensible. She had accomplished exactly what she wanted. She knew how to write that contest entry now. So she wrote it and then, reading it over, she felt awed. How could she ever have written anything like that?

She should feel triumphant, she told herself as she dropped it in the mail. She had got exactly what she wanted and Stew had not even distracted her enough for her to bring that magazine out of hiding. She should have felt wonderful. Instead, she felt terrible.

She went right on feeling terrible for weeks, with that odd ache in her heart never leaving her night or day. Once Stew tried to speak to her but she simply turned her head away. After that, he never so much as glanced in her direction. He went straight to Miss Adger when he wanted something.

Miss Adger was rather smug about that. At last, she congratulated Betty repeatedly, she had found a girl who could keep him in his place, not like those other three flipperty-jibbets. She hoped Betty would stay with the library a long, long time.

In her more depressed moods, Betty began to fear she might. She still had a lot of dates but none of them were fun any more. Sometimes she wondered if she might not just as well begin to wear brown dresses now and walk as if her feet hurt.

For some reason, she hated the very sight of a contest advertisement these days, with a fierce personal hate. Then, one evening, listening to the radio, she heard Stew's name mentioned as the winner of a five hundred dollar prize. She never listened to any contest programs again.

She even crossed completely off her

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memory that date on which the car prizes would be announced. She simply went on working, nine to five one week, and twelve to nine the next. Sometimes she felt as if she had been doing that for centuries. And would do it for several more.

She was sitting at the horseshoe desk, watching the clock tick slowly toward nine and wondering when those last three people would leave, so she could close up, when Stew walked in. His sea-green eyes glinted hotly and that one-sided grin was very pronounced.

He came straight toward her and deliberately put his elbows on the desk. "Congratulations," he drawled.

Miss Adger came scurrying up, brown dress rustling defensively. "We're just on the point of locking up, Stew Towers, and we're not going to stay open just because you want the population of pigmy tribes in deepest Africa, or something equally as silly," she warned righteously.

"Thought never entered my head," he swore blandly. "I was just congratulating Betty. She not only knows how to get the information she wants out of this library, she knows how to make sure nobody else gets it. I found that magazine later, too late, and glanced through it out of curiosity. Very excellent. So was your entry, Betty. They read it."

"What?" she whispered, rosy lips parting.

"What entry?" Miss Adger demanded.

"Very nice work," he said judiciously, but his green eyes were blazing. "You didn't forget a single one of those fine touches I coached you in."

MISS ADGER looked from one to the other. "Stew, I don't know what this is all about, but you stop distracting Betty."

"I'm not distracting her. She distracted me. Double crossed me by hiding that magazine and very neatly pumped every bit of information out of me she needed. Like a dope, I thought I'd offended her by kissing her. I didn't know she had got what she wanted from me and couldn't be bothered any longer."

"You kissed Betty?" Miss Adger said, as if she couldn't believe her ears.

"People do kiss, you know," he said gently. "All I got was a kiss. She gets a new car and the five thousand dollar grand prize."

"Prize!" Miss Adger turned on Betty. "You mean, you entered one of those contests?"

She nodded silently, her brown eyes very big in her white face.

"This is—" Miss Adger drew a long breath and started all over again. "Betty, you know how I feel about contest hounds. Helping them is bad enough. But to become one yourself. That is completely—"

"Reprehensible," Stew supplied cheerfully.

"Exactly. Betty, I don't know what's wrong with Stew to make him do these things. Sometimes I've felt more sorry for him than anything else. But there's no excuse for you. Entering contests. Hiding reference material from the public. That I can't condone. We are here to help the public. Within reason, of course. I don't think you'd better come back, even for one more day."

"You mean I'm fired?" she asked numbly.

"You are excused from further duty," Miss Adger said formally. "A check will be mailed you."

Betty just nodded and stumbled instinctively toward her locker in the basement. She couldn't think, or even feel. She was completely stunned, moving automatically. Vaguely she realized she had won a car and five thousand dollars and lost her job. But only vaguely. Everything had a misty, unreal quality.

She stumbled out the basement door. She never wanted to see Miss Adger again.

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A car, double parked a little way down the block, shot forward to stop right beside her. She caught her breath sharply but the blazing anger was gone from Stew's green eyes.

He jumped out and put a hand under her elbow. "You look like a zombie," he observed calmly. "We may have our differences but you've had a shock and shouldn't be wandering around alone. Jump in. I'll drive you home."

She hardly knew she was getting in the car until she was there. Then she kept telling herself that she must be calm, she must pull herself together. But her mind simply kept whirling in dizzy circles that made no sense at all.

Then Stew stopped in front of her house. Betty turned her bright head and looked at him from a long way off, through the shocked daze that still held her.

"You lost me my job," she said slowly. "I'll have an awful time getting another one now."

"You lost me a car," he retorted cheerfully. "And I'll bet there won't be another car prize all year."

"Maybe that makes us even," she decided heavily.

"Not quite," he said.

She stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"This," he said.

THEN SHE was in his arms and he was kissing her. That shocked daze shattered at his touch. Instead the golden glow was burning all around her again, star-shot and shimmering, and unendurably beautiful. Her heart was racing and yet, she thought it would break with all this sweetness and beauty and glory, much too big for any one heart or one girl to contain.

"You are a bad, naughty, reprehensible character," he murmured against her bright hair. "You hid my reference material. You won my car. Worse still, you stole my heart. And wouldn't even speak to me again, let alone see me to give me a chance to get it back."

Her eyes dilated blackly. She had stolen Stew's heart! What did he think he had done with hers? All at once, she knew that she had fallen hopelessly in love with him that night. That was what had made her so angry when she thought he was only trying to distract her and that was what had been wrong with her ever since.

"Stole your heart?" she exploded. "We're still even."

He lifted his dark head suddenly and looked searchingly down at her face. "What did you say? Didn't Miss Adger poison your mind against me completely? Which makes you a dopey girl as well."

"She may have poisoned my mind, but what's that got to do with this?" she demanded.

"Not a thing," Stew said promptly and kissed her again.

Betty clung to him. Suddenly she knew her heart wasn't going to burst. It was simply going on forever, dancing in a star-shot, golden glow.

"Of course," he said severely, "I'm only asking you to marry me because I lost your job for you and you must have some means of support."

She laughed, low in her throat. "You're only asking me to marry you because you want that car, one way or another."

Then their glances met and clung, and slow delirious thrills of happiness shot along Betty's veins. Because she knew Stew didn't mean what he said any more than she did. That was just another way of telling each other how much they were in love and how wonderful the future was going to be.

♥ ♥ ♥

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Love Is Stubborn

By

Frances Scotland

GAIL CORRIGAN rode her cream-colored Palomino up to the big mail box, marked Skyline Dude Ranch, and deliberately avoided looking at the box beside it. It had Patrick Shea painted on it in bold black letters, and just the sight of that name was enough to make her want to throw things. Good solid things like rocks.

She heard a car coming along the winding road from town and frowned, wondering who it could be. No more guests were expected until next spring. Soon snow would be falling in the beautiful Arizona mountains and it would be time to move into Phoenix for the winter.

Only this year Gail wouldn't be going to Phoenix with her mother. She'd be going to San Francisco to become Mrs. Harley Stone and live a glamorous, exciting life seven hundred miles away from Pat Shea and his isolated ranch.

She leaned down and tugged at the handle of the box which stayed obstinately shut. "Darn," she said aloud and got off her horse, trailing the reins on the ground. She'd have to tell one of the boys about it. This was the third time she'd had trouble with it.

Bracing one boot on the post she tugged harder and was so absorbed in what she was doing, she was only vaguely aware that the car had rounded the bend and stopped.

Suddenly close behind her, there was a piercing whistle.

She turned, startled almost out of her wits, then gasped. A tall man was slapping her horse's flank and Gail's eyes narrowed angrily as the Palomino took off through the pine trees toward the ranch. The man turned and grinned at her. Her temper quit simmering and rose to a full boil. It was Pat Shea!

"Of all the low-down tricks," she blazed at him furiously.

"Sorry I had to do that," he said cheerfully with that bland self-assurance that was so much a part of him. "But I wasn't taking any chances on your not riding to the ranch with me. I've got something to tell you."

He stepped over to the mail box. "Here, let me do that," he said calmly. She glared at him helplessly as he opened the box with hardly any trouble at all and took out the leather mail sack.

"If it's not too much to ask," she said acidly. "Just what could you possibly have to tell me?"

Pat was so sure Gail would marry him, he never bothered to ask.

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"You're impossible, Pat, completely and utterly impossible!" she cried.

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She'd been gratefully sure she'd seen the last of him two months ago, when she told him furiously that she wouldn't marry him if he were the last man on earth. And Pat had left without a word, as though he'd finally believed her.

As she watched him go, she ignored the tugging at her heart. She'd known Pat since she'd been in pigtails. Since they'd played sheriff and outlaw together—when they weren't fighting like Indians. There was no denying that none of the men she'd met since seemed quite as thrilling. Pat, with his thick black hair and dangerously quiet eyes that looked right through you, was definitely unsettling.

BUT SHE always told herself determinedly that no man, no matter how thrilling he was, was going to dictate to her for the rest of her life as her father had done. Big Mike Corrigan had died when she was sixteen, but until the day of his death he'd ruled her and her mother both. His word was final and simply not to be questioned. Mary Corrigan was gentle and submissive. She'd adored her husband. Gail had been fond of Big Mike but she always promised herself that when she grew up, she was going to marry a man who would treat her as an equal, not as though she were a puppet with no mind of her own.

And Pat was like that. He never asked a girl anything. He just told her. He took it for granted she couldn't live without him and went on serenely confident that she'd follow him blindly in any decision he made. Whether it was living in an ancient ranch house, or whether it was simply that they were going to have chops for dinner instead of chicken.

An exaggerated look of hurt surprise crossed Pat's strong handsome face now. "It's ready," he said briefly with that twinkle in his gray eyes that always made Gail feel as if she were going to have a heart attack.

She eyed him narrowly and wished violently that she hadn't had to see him again before she left. Seeing him always made her want to forget how much she hated him. "What's ready?" she demanded suspiciously.

"The ranch, of course," he said blandly. "That's why I haven't been over lately. Been getting it ready for us to move in." He grinned at her aimably.

Gail counted to ten. She might have known that with Pat's egotistical cocksureness, he'd never learn what the word "No" meant. Then a triumphant gleam came into her eyes that were a lively shamrock green. This time Pat was in for a shock. "If you can wake up that block of cement you use for a brain long enough to grasp something," she said bitingly, "maybe this will straighten you out. I'm going to be married."

He looked at her accusingly. "Of course, darling. What do you take me for?"

She glared at him. "Very funny," she snapped. "Only it just so happens that Harley Stone is the man I'm going to marry!"

Pat looked amused. "Well! And who might he be?"

"He's a considerate, intelligent human being," she came back at him. "He came to the ranch six weeks ago for his vacation and we fell in love. Now he's come to take me back to San Francisco with him. We're going to be married there."

Pat only shrugged and said calmly, "I seem to be behind the times. That's what I get for staying away so long."

He looks, Gail thought furiously, about as upset as a mule in the middle of an alfalfa patch!

Pat headed for the car. "Come on," he said. He gave her a sly look. "You can tell me all about this crazy notion of yours on the way to the ranch. And then I can proceed to talk you out of it."

She followed him fuming silently. She'd

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have to ride with him. It was two miles to the ranch and besides he had the mail sack.

"Well," he said as he started the car. "Let's have it. Who and what is this character you think you're going to marry?"

SHE STARED straight ahead. She felt decidedly shaky sitting there beside him, but she told herself sternly that that was only because she was furious at him. Pat was enough to make anybody shake with rage.

"Harley's not a character," she said, annoyed. "He's a very successful stock broker. He's also the kind of man you could never understand. In the first place he doesn't take me for granted. Why he wouldn't even take me out to dinner without asking me where I'd like to go. In fact," she added with a little thrill of satisfaction, "whatever comes up, I'll always know that Harley will consult me before making a decision."

"Sounds like a drip," Pat muttered. And then suddenly he was laughing.

She gave him a cold look. "What's so funny?"

"I was just wondering if this super Romeo of yours knows about your temper yet," Pat said.

She frowned. A vague feeling of uneasiness crept over her at the thought of Pat meeting Harley. Pat was capable of saying all sorts of things. His sense of humor was definitely warped. He particularly got a kick out of telling people what a beautiful Irish temper she had. It was true that there was a time when she'd enjoyed nothing more than a rousing battle. But she was grown now and all that seemed remote and silly. And one of the things Harley said he loved about her was her calm reserve. Only last night he'd told her, "I think I love you best because you're so deliciously cool."

As they came in sight of the ranch, she felt more miserable than she ever had in her life. If only Pat had stayed away one week longer!

He left her in front of the main building. "I'll go over to the barn and unsaddle your horse when he comes in," he said. "See you later."

"Are you staying?" She tried to sound casual.

He grinned. "Indefinitely."

She turned on her heel and left him. He's just deliberately trying to be as exasperating as he can, she thought angrily.

She hurried into the long rambling log house. Harley would be back from town soon. He'd had to go to phone his office because the line to the ranch had developed a cloudiness lately that made it impossible to call long distance. It sounded as if it were full of crickets.

There'd be a full moon tonight and she and Harley were going to ride over to Boulder Lake. She'd make some sandwiches, then shower and change into fresh clothes, and be ready and waiting when he got back. She certainly didn't want Pat to see him before she did and tell him all sorts of wild things about her.

But it was a half hour later when she ran up to her room. Her mother had called her and asked her to help find her glasses which, as usual, she had mislaid.

GAIL GLANCED out the window as she finished combing her long hair. She looked past the neat little cabins nestled in the trees, and her heart sank. Harley's sleek gray convertible was just sliding to a stop and Pat was striding across the clearing toward him. She dashed on some lipstick, raced downstairs, grabbed the sandwiches and went out.

"Here she is now," Pat said as she walked quickly toward the car. He smiled at her with an expression of innocence that was strictly phoney. "What a coincidence. We were just talking about you."

She smiled and hoped she didn't look

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like a wildcat baring its fangs. If Pat thought he was going to tease her into blowing up, he was crazy. "Hello, darling," she said to Harley. "Jim has the horses saddled, I think. We'd better get started."

Harley got out of the car, kissed her and said fondly, "Let's go." He turned to Pat. "Glad to have met you," he said curtly.

It was all Gail could do to keep from laughing. Obviously Harley hadn't believed whatever Pat had told him. She flashed Pat a triumphant look. "See you later," she mocked.

As they walked to the corral, Harley looked at her questioningly. "Who on earth was that?"

"That," she answered, "is a character who owns a ranch near here."

"I don't think I like him," Harley said.

"Neither do I," she replied firmly as she got on her horse and they started off.

Harley shook his head. "He seems rather boorish."

She was silent. Pat was blunt to say the least. But she felt strangely resentful at Harley's calling him a boor. "I'm being ridiculous," she told herself. "Naturally Harley would think that of him. And anyway, why should I care if he does?"

She made up her mind to forget about Pat completely and enjoy just being with Harley. There were so many things she liked about Harley. He was suave and smooth for one thing. As they rode along, he told her how lovely she looked in the saffron glow of the early evening. She sighed. It was nice to have a man pay her compliments. It made her feel—well, desirable.

They discussed the sketches for the house they planned to build in fashionable Burlingame. Harley'd brought them back with him from San Francisco. "Have you decided, darling," he said, "which style architecture you like best?"

"I can't make up my mind," she answered. "I never dreamed houses could be so beautiful." She smiled at him affectionately, but somehow she didn't feel as thrilled as she should have. Instead she felt oddly irritable, kept noticing silly little things like the way he held his horse's head too high until the animal was in a nervous lather. "What's the matter with me?" she asked herself impatiently. "I never noticed that before. He isn't actually hurting the horse!"

WHEN THEY reached the lake, they ate their sandwiches beside the cool clear water. She found her mind wandering back to the times she and Pat had ridden here years ago, and had to deliberately force her thoughts back to Harley.

When they got back, Harley kissed her gently and tenderly before he left her at the door. She thought gratefully, That's what I like about him. He isn't wild and possessive. She remembered one time when Pat had taken her roughly in his arms and kissed her. It had been a violent kiss that had made her feel as if someone had lit a bonfire in her veins.

As she said good night to Harley, she noticed furiously that Pat's car was still standing in the drive. It looked, she thought, as if she were going to have to put up with him until she and Harley left for San Francisco!

The next morning she was sitting in the shade of the long verandah. Harley had some important letters to write, would be working all day, so she decided to polish the Indian knicknacks that were a part of the colorful decorations of the guest cabins. She was shining one of the hammered copper ash trays when Pat came sauntering along the drive.

"Where's Prince Charming?" He grinned.

Gail frowned at him. "If you're talking about Harley, he's working. And," she added testily, "that's more than you seem to be doing."

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"The boys always take good care of things for me when I have important business elsewhere," he said easily. "That's what a crew is for." He seated himself leisurely on the rustic porch railing and rolled a cigarette. He never smoked what he scornfully called tailor-mades. Would just as soon roll a cigarette in a fashionable night-club as he would at home. You couldn't tell him it looked ridiculous, but then you could never tell him anything anyhow!

He looks, she thought angrily, as if he's going to sit here all day and heckle me. She'd gotten up with a nagging headache and would, she knew, get over it a lot faster if Pat would go away and leave her alone. "Haven't you got a home?" she asked impatiently.

He regarded her solemnly. "We've got a home," he said. "You just haven't realized it yet."

She sighed and mentally counted the days until she'd be leaving. Five. Well, she'd just have to ignore him until then.

"Speaking of homes," he went on with maddening calm. "How about riding over and taking a look at it since your broker is busy." He puffed thoughtfully on his cigarette. "He's so considerate and wonderful, I don't suppose he'd be jealous."

She glared at him. "Nobody in their right mind would be jealous of you!" she snorted.

He grinned, not in the least offended, of course. "Well, let's go." He swung his long legs over the railing and dropped lightly to the ground.

"No thanks, Mr. Shea," she said tartly.

He eyed her shrewdly. "What's the matter? You're not afraid you'll weaken if you see how I've fixed it up, are you?"

"Don't be ridiculous," she flared while her head pounded painfully. "I've never been afraid of anything in my life and you know it!"

"Sh—" he whispered urgently. "Watch that temper. Harley will hear you and he might not like it."

"I haven't got a temper," she snapped, "except when you're around."

HE GRINNED smugly. "That," he said, "is precisely why you're going to have to marry me. You couldn't stand to be married to someone who couldn't give you a nice friendly fight once in a while."

She put the ash tray down on the table. She'd never felt so exasperated with anyone in her life.

Pat leaned on the railing, obviously enjoying himself. "If you're not afraid to ride over there, prove it," he murmured, a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

She looked longingly at the ash tray on the table. It would sound wonderful bouncing off Pat's head. Still, maybe the ride would help her headache. Riding always made her feel better, no matter what was wrong with her. And Harley was going to be busy all day. Perhaps if she went with Pat and showed him how completely unaffected she was, it would convince him she really didn't care about him or his ranch. He might even, she thought hopefully, go home and stay there, and spare her the aggravation of putting up with him any longer.

By the time they'd ridden halfway there, her headache was gone and she decided she was glad she'd come. For once, Pat was acting halfway sane.

When they came out of the trees above the ranch, she gasped in utter amazement. What had been the usual clump of sprawling ranch buildings was now a picture of neat, trim loveliness. Like something out of a dream. "Pat!" she cried, forgetting her annoyance. "How did you ever—"

"Oh, just squirted a little paint around," he said nonchalantly. "Come on, I'll show you the inside."

She followed him wonderingly through

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a sparklingly white Dutch door into a pine-paneled living room. It was like a picture in the latest home decoration magazine. A little paint! she thought to herself. Why he must have spent a small fortune, not to mention the hours of painstaking work as well.

Everywhere she looked, she saw proof of that. The huge fireplace constructed of gray stones that he'd gathered from the nearby mountainside. The built-in bookcases, the furniture and accessories that had been shipped from New York.

He showed her the other rooms without either of them saying a word until they came to the den. It was just what a den should be, a haven of cozy warmth. Gail's eyes wandered to the pictures that almost covered one wall.

In one of them Pat stood, laughing, in front of a gay blue and white airplane with a girl and a man. Pat had his arm around the girl, who had a soft gentle beauty. There was something dove-like about those eyes in the picture that were laughing up at him.

"Who's that?" Gail asked, trying to ignore the feeling almost of jealousy that was creeping into her heart.

"Dianne Blake," he said. He bent and scooped up a paper the wind-flicked curtain had blown to the floor.

She couldn't see his face. Of course, it was nothing to her, but somehow she couldn't help wondering. "A conquest?" she said too lightly.

He grinned, hesitated a moment while Gail's heart pounded ridiculously. "We liked each other," he said. "I met her when I took that three month vacation out on the coast. I taught her to fly."

"I suppose," Gail said, surprised at the sudden sharpness in her voice, "that she fell hook, line and sinker for that masterful charm of yours."

He looked serious. "I said we liked each other," he repeated shortly, and Gail immediately felt ashamed. After all, what business was it of hers if he had gone with another girl?

AS THEY went outside, the sun was starting to sink behind the mountains. It threw a rosy glow over everything, from the distant peaks to the oddly shaped strip of cleared ground that looked as if it were ready for alfalfa to be planted. Gail took a deep breath of the sage-filled air and it hit her like a physical blow that she didn't want to leave. It's high time I did leave, she thought a little wildly.

She realized, with something like panic, how easy it would be to say "yes," to Pat and get herself in for a lifetime of insufferable bossing. That was the trouble with these dictatorial men. They could be so charming—when they wanted to be!

But she did feel a certain pang of guilt. Of course, she told herself, there was no reason why she should. Hadn't she made it perfectly clear to him that she wasn't going to have any part in his life? At least it would have been clear to anybody but a stubborn ox like Pat! But he'd so obviously put his whole heart and soul into it, she couldn't help feeling a little uncomfortable.

She looked at him as they got on their horses. "Pat," she said slowly, "I—I'm sorry."

He raised a surprised eyebrow. "What about?" he said easily.

"Well, I mean you went to so much trouble." She shrugged hopelessly. "But I did tell—"

"Don't be silly," he interrupted her airily.

As they started off, she tried not to think about how sensational Pat looked on a horse. She sighed. He certainly was being a good sport about all this.

When they were back at the ranch, they turned their horses loose and walked toward the house. Suddenly Pat stopped, took her by the shoulders and turned her toward him. "Think you're going to like

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our new home, darling?" he said complacently.

She gasped, stared at him in disbelief. But before she could answer him he bent his head and then his mouth was on hers, compelling, insisting, demanding the response she couldn't have withheld if her life depended on it. For a brief, wild moment, their lips clung, passionately, urgently. Then, with a heart-tearing effort she wrenched herself from his arms.

She fought down the wild trembling in her heart and stared at him incredulously. If she needed anything to snap her back to the reality of what life with Pat would be like, there it was. "You just can't believe, can you," she finally managed to say, "that there's the slightest chance you're not going to get your own way? You're impossible, Pat, completely and utterly impossible! You—"

Pat's eyes went suddenly dark with anger. "Now let me tell you something!" he interrupted her rudely. "You're just kidding yourself. You think you're being smart. That wild Irish streak in you won't let you see things as they are. The woman doesn't live that doesn't want a man to boss her around once in awhile. The reason your mother is the lovely woman she is today is because she saw Big Mike for the man he was."

She opened her mouth.

But he didn't give her a chance to say anything. His eyes blazed angrily into hers. "I'll make you a bet," he almost shouted at her. "One of these days you're going to wake up and find that your Harley is first cousin to a jellyfish!" And then he was striding over to his car.

GAIL STOOD there shaking with rage as he yanked open the door and got in. "Why don't you marry Dianne Blake?" she screamed after him. "She looks like your type!"

Pat glanced back at her and laughed mockingly. "A good idea!"

Gail turned and walked slowly toward the house. That was Pat for you, she thought bitterly. He made it seem that Harley was weak just because he was considerate. Harley! Suddenly she realized guiltily that she hadn't thought of him all day!

She walked more quickly, feeling a desperate need to be with him, to feel the quiet assurance of his love. At least, she told herself, Pat had finally left for good. Now she could get her sanity back and keep it!

After an evening with Harley she did feel calmer. For the next few days he was even more considerate and sweeter than ever. That was why it was so ridiculous that she had those fleeting moments wondering what Pat was doing. She even caught herself getting irritable at times.

Then, four days later, it happened. It was their last ride. Tomorrow they were leaving for San Francisco. As they crossed a swift-running stream, Harley's horse stumbled. Gail felt her temper simmering dangerously and had all she could do to keep from screaming at him, "For heavens sake, give him his head!" What's the matter with me, she thought irritably. Ever since Pat showed up I've been just like a soreheaded bear!

She watched the horse's feet slipping precariously on the rocky bottom and was just about to blow up when with a wild splashing and churning the horse went down. Harley fell clear but hung onto the reins.

Gail gasped. The sight of the horse frantically trying to get its head clear of the water while Harley clung stupidly to the reins snapped her control. "Let him go!" she shouted.

Harley's face was white but he let go. The horse, its head free, lunged to its feet. Gail led it to the bank where Harley had scrambled and now stood dripping. "What were you trying to do, drown him?" she raged at him.

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He didn't answer her until he had climbed back on the horse. When he looked at her his face was set, almost grim. "Gail, I'm surprised at your behavior," he said.

She winced at the sudden coldness in his voice. "I'm sorry I blew up like that, darling," she said contritely. "It's not that I care more for the horse than I do you. It's just—" She smiled a little shamefacedly.

"That's not the point," Harley snapped. "I'm surprised at your lack of control. Really, Gail, I never thought you'd let yourself go like that." He shuddered. "It's a good thing no one was around. Why you were making a perfect spectacle of yourself!"

She stared at him, but said nothing. As they rode along in stiff silence she felt herself getting angry all over again. She tried to tell herself Harley was still the man she'd thought he was but it was no use. Why he was actually acting patronizing!

WITH AWFUL certainty she knew she couldn't marry him, couldn't marry any man who hadn't the nerve to be himself, who'd always be worrying what other people would think. Pat, she thought suddenly, was right. Harley was first cousin to a jelly-fish! He wasn't any more considerate than anyone else. The minute anything happened that interfered with his own fixed ideas, he was positively nasty about it!

She looked at him and wondered how she could ever have thought she loved him. "Harley, I can't marry you," she said abruptly.

He stared. "Surely, Gail, you're joking," he said.

"I'm not joking," she answered. "We'd just never get along. I was a fool not to see it before but now I do." She tugged at the beautiful star sapphire glistening on her finger and thrust it into his hand. Before he could say or do anything she turned her horse and galloped off through the trees. She wanted desperately to be alone to think—or try to think.

At first she just rode, not caring what direction she took. But as the wind whipped her cheeks, her thoughts began to straighten themselves out. Her mind stopped whirling crazily and then it swept over her in one compelling flash what she was going to do. How could she have been so blind? She turned and headed east, toward Pat's ranch!

How could she have failed to see how right Pat was? Why hadn't she seen before that what she wanted was what any woman wanted, a man—a real man? She smiled to herself. What if Pat was a little bossy. After all hadn't she felt twice as exhilirated fighting with him as she'd ever felt when Harley kissed her? And what if she was going to live on an isolated ranch. All that seemed trivial now. The important thing was being with the man she loved.

Though her horse was fairly flying over the ground it seemed as if he had weights on his feet, that it would be an age before she could get to Pat and tell him what a fool she'd been.

But finally she was there. Her heart caught as she opened the Dutch door. "Pat," she called softly.

A brooding silence answered her. She ran quickly through the house, then came back outside, an awful sinking feeling in her heart. The ranch was deserted.

As she stood there in the shade wondering miserably where Pat had gone, she heard a low droning. She listened a moment, then realized it was a plane. She stared numbly at it as it circled the ranch and started down. Her eyes widened. It was heading for the alfalfa field only it wasn't an alfalfa field, she realized now. It was a landing strip. The plane was going to land!

She watched, fascinated, as it floated

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gently down, its robin-blue wings sparkling gayly in the sunlight.

It rolled lightly to a stop and then Gail stood frozen. Getting out of the plane was a girl. A beautiful girl. Even at this distance there was no mistaking who it was. It was Dianne Blake. And right behind her was Pat!

Gail's throat closed up. Dianne's arm was linked companionably in Pat's as they walked toward her. They were laughing. They looked so happy it made Gail wish she could just evaporate into thin air. For the first time in her life she felt she just couldn't face something.

THEY HADN'T seen her and she stepped dazedly around the corner of the house to her horse. She mounted quickly and was fumbling with the reins, choking back the tears that were threatening to blind her, when a hand caught her ankle. "Where do you think you're going?" Pat asked.

"I—" Gail stammered, and tried to spur her horse. But Pat caught the reins. Then he was lifting her from the saddle. He set her on the ground but kept a firm grip on her arms. "You got here just in time, darling," he said.

She tried to smile. "For the wedding?" she managed to whisper painfully.

"Of course," he said with sickening enthusiasm.

"I—I hope you'll both be very happy," she said making a desperate effort to sound casual.

Pat looked at her searchingly for a long moment, then murmured, "We'll be happy, you and I."

Gail fought for control. Was this his idea of a joke? And then miraculously he was saying, "The plane's for you, darling. You know, week-ends in Las Vegas, the races at Caliente, Mexico City." He waved his hand expansively. "Anywhere at all that strikes our fancy. We can go anywhere."

She stared at him unbelievingly. "But Dianne—"

Pat's eyes twinkled. "Dianne's happily married. Her husband's a buddy of mine. They sold me the plane and she came along to take some air pictures of Arizona. She and Ted are camera fiends. I'm bringing her over to stay at your place tonight. We'll fly her back home tomorrow."

"Oh, Pat," Gail sobbed. And then she was in his arms and the world was new and bright and shining.

Suddenly she pulled away, looked up at him. "But darling," she said wonderingly. "How did you know I wasn't going to marry Harley?"

His eyes grew sober, and his hands tightened on her shoulders. "When a man loves a girl the way I love you, he has to believe in that love no matter what," he said. "I knew it was a lot to ask you to live out here the rest of your life and well—" He grinned down at her boyishly. "I guess I did act overbearing but a guy has to cover up how scared he is some way!"

He caught her close again and she listened dazedly to him saying, "From now on we're going to be partners, fifty-fifty—for life."

She knew he meant it but a little smile tugged at her lips. She hadn't known Pat Shea all these years for nothing! There would be times when he would lay down the law to her. She sighed happily. It was, she realized now, a part of what she had loved about him all along. Pat was a man.

And as his lips closed over hers she knew that he was her man, forever and ever!

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Tell Me Your Troubles

By Viola Cornett

Ted thought of Marian as a sister until the day she acted like one.

TED BARRON was in a mood tonight. As usual, the mood was the product of an interview with Lois Porter, his boss's daughter. Ted pressed the door bell of Marian Stevens' apartment half viciously. Marian would be good for what ailed him; she was so understanding and sympathetic.

Presently Marian opened the door. He smiled at her ash-blonde littleness almost pathetically. "Hi, kid. Mind if I come in?"

Her blue eyes studied him oddly for a moment. Then she smiled, too. "Not if you'll come in and test out the new meat loaf I've been making. Are you insured?"

He had really hoped for an invitation to dinner. Marian was nearly as good a cook as his mother had been, and besides he needed the hour or so that eating a meal would take to unburden himself of his gloomy thoughts, and let her cheer him up. She was good at that.

He winked at her relievedly. "Pie, too?" he coaxed.

Marian sighed. "Only chocolate cake. You'll settle for that or—"

She started to close the door. Grinning, Ted thrust a foot in the opening that remained. "Your chocolate cake? I'll not only settle for it, I'll get down on my knees and give thanks." He pushed the door wider open with a big hand. "Let me in, pal. I got troubles."

She turned away from him toward the kitchen. "Lois Porter again?" she tossed over her shoulder.

"Yeah." He laughed shortly. "Who else?"

He followed her into the tiny kitchen, and leaned gloomily against the refrigerator as she whipped up a green salad, and got her meat loaf out of the oven. He felt almost luxuriously unhappy. It was swell to have somebody like Marian to talk to when you felt low like this. Ted had never had a sister, but living across the hall from Marian since coming to San Francisco had been just as good. There wasn't a thing

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He pushed the door open wider and said coaxingly, "Let me in, pal. I got troubles."

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he couldn't tell her, they were the closest of pals.

When they were seated at the little table in the dinette a few minutes later, Marian said, "Okay. Let's have it. What's the lovely Lois been up to now?"

Ted gave her a frowning glance. Why, her voice was half-sarcastic. She sounded impatient!

His frown deepened. Then he decided that he had been mistaken. Marian was always sympathetic. She was probably just tired. Her job as bookkeeper for a big stationery firm was demanding and nerve-wracking.

He said slowly, "She came strolling through the salesroom today. Man, is that girl beautiful! Black hair and green eyes . . ." His voice trailed off as he remembered the sight of Lois Porter that afternoon, tall and cool and laughing, smoother and more elegant than any car in the salesroom. Maybe that was a funny way to think of a girl, but being an automobile salesman, Ted classified girls like cars. And Lois was a swift, streamlined job, custom-made stuff, really. He sighed. Yeah, he had it bad.

Marian toyed with her salad. Her eyes were on the fork in her hand. She said, "I know the girl's a brunette. What I'm waiting for is the story of what she did to you today. By the look of you, it was close to homicide." Her voice was light, but it seemed to Ted that it held an undercurrent of trouble to come.

He had a sudden, irritated sense of being on uncertain ground. But that was just plain crazy. He knew Marian inside out. That was why she was such a wonderful friend. Other girls got temperamental, but never Marian. She was one in a million, a real pal. Almost as good as a man friend. No, better. There were some things you couldn't tell a man. But a girl who was like a sister allowed you the luxury of no reserves.

He opened his mouth to go on, but before he could speak, Marian said quickly, "On second thought, let's eat first and talk later. Your meat loaf is getting cold, and if I know you, this is going to be a long story."

She smiled at him, as though to soften the words, but the smile was oddly unreal and strained. Again Ted had that bothered feeling. But he pushed it away. Of course, she wouldn't want him to talk until after dinner. And personally, he was hungry, and the food before him looked good.

THEY ENDED the meal with coffee and the chocolate cake. Then Marian said, "We'll let the dishes stay. Come in the living room and we'll toast our feet before the coal grate, find *Hearts and Flowers* on the radio, and smoke two packs of cigarettes while you unburden your soul!"

She got up and led the way into the other room. Ted frowned a little as he followed. Marian was acting awfully flip tonight. She was usually sweet and quiet. This smart stuff didn't suit her at all. He had a good mind to tell her so.

Then, in front of the fire, with a cigarette in his hand, he relaxed into the confiding mood that usually claimed him when he was in her apartment. Taking up where he'd left off previously, he said, "I talked to her for a few minutes. I thought I was really making headway. So I asked her for a date. But she only laughed and gave me the up-and-down with those green eyes. 'Sorry, I'm booked for a month ahead, darling,' she said. And strolled off, looking as if I didn't exist. I tell you, that girl's really got me going!"

He looked at Marian, waiting for the sympathy that had always been forthcoming, up to now. But her lips were tight around her cigarette. She took too deep a drag, coughed, and then stubbed the cigarette out nervously. Then she absolutely glared at him! "Why tell me about it?" she snapped.

Ted's mouth fell open.

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Marian rushed on, "What do you think I run here, an Advice to the Lovelorn agency? All you've been doing for the past two months is drool over this Lois Porter character. For my money, she's a spoiled, selfish gal who laps up all the attention she can get from anybody. It amuses her to keep you dangling, see just how far she can go, how much you'll take. And you're taking plenty!" She drew in a furious breath. "What are you, a man or a mouse? I'll answer that, you're a mouse. Furthermore, you're a mouse without a backbone, even. The way you let Lois kick you around makes me just plain sick!"

That was telling him. And from a girl he'd considered his best friend. Red tinged Ted's high cheekbones. He lashed out, "Nice to know what you think of me. And here I thought we were pals."

Marian laughed wildly. "Oh, wonderful! Pals! That's just ducky. You monopolize my time, and my apartment, and all I hear about is this dope of a Lois Porter. I used to enjoy talking to you, I thought you were reasonably intelligent. But was I wrong!"

He stood up. He couldn't remember ever having been so angry. "Sorry I've been such a pest. But it won't happen again, don't worry. Your time and your apartment are all your own, baby."

He turned and strode out. With incredible control, he refrained from slamming the apartment door behind him. He was boiling.

Walking down the hall, he thought, I need a drink. I need several drinks. Of all the unreasonable women!

His thoughts trailed off into blurred anger as he pressed the bell for the elevator. At the bar on the corner, he drank four brandies, one right after the other, and was glad for the furious warmth that filled him. It neutralized the funny coldness that had started to grow somewhere inside him.

Then he went home. Marian's light was still on in the apartment across the hall from his own. Naturally it would be, the night was still young. But somehow he felt as though hours had gone by since their quarrel.

He undressed gloomily, and got into bed. He felt low. Women! You couldn't trust even the best of them. They were changeable, temperamental, hysterical. Apparently Marian had just treated him in a friendly fashion because she felt sorry for a small-town boy new to the big city. Then even her pity had worn thin. Well, that was all right with him. Marian Stevens meant nothing in his young life, nothing at all. He'd be hanged if he ever rang her door bell again.

WHEN HE woke up next morning, that mood of sullen anger was still with him. At work, he had to fight to keep from snapping at people. And he'd apparently lost his touch where salesmanship was concerned. Two prospects whom he would have sworn were on the verge of buying got away from him. By noon, Ted felt fit to chew nails.

He ate a solitary, silent lunch, and plodded back to the agency. When Sam Porter, his boss, and Lois's father, asked him about the morning's clients, Ted was gruff, barely civil. And the older man gave his tall, brown-haired young employe an odd, measuring glance before he turned and walked away.

After that, Ted felt gloomier than ever. He knew, as well as any salesman in the place, that Sam Porter demanded complete cooperation from all those who worked for him. "Have your moods on your own time, son!" was one of Sam's oft-repeated statements to any employe who inflicted his personal temperament on those around him. A bad-tempered man didn't last long at the Porter agency. Ted sighed. Up to now, he'd been the most

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good-natured fellow on earth, in spite of the misery that his attraction for Lois Porter had put him through. But since last night, he'd felt completely off-balance. And Ted laughed shortly. Marian Stevens! His big hands clenched. What that girl needed was a darned good spanking. He hoped that she would marry a guy who'd beat her three times a day.

It was along about three that afternoon that he saw Lois stroll into the salesroom. She was as tall and cool and fascinating as ever, and the sight of her made Ted's gray eyes light up as ardently as ever. He started to move toward her, then stopped himself. Marian's words of the night before scorched into his memory.

Ted's lean jaw squared. So Marian thought he was letting Lois kick him around, eh? Deliberately, he turned his back on Lois, and walked across the salesroom, away from her.

He stood with his back to her, then, surveying a sleek green convertible as though he'd never seen it before. His gray eyes were almost black. So Lois was dated up for a month ahead, eh? That was what she had told him the day before. And every other time he'd gotten up enough courage to ask for a date, she had given him the same sort of brush-off.

Suddenly his anger transferred itself from Marian to Lois. Or, rather, widened to include the whole feminine species. No girl was going to get him upset.

He turned his thoughts away from Lois, and concentrated on the car before him. That was what a man ought to concentrate on, his job. He was a good salesman, and he'd really go places. He'd—

A softly laughing voice spoke at his elbow. "Hi, there! Why so aloof today, Mr. Barron? You're as snooty as an ostrich with its head stuck in the sand."

Ted's heart jumped. He turned to face Lois almost unsteadily. His lips parted to say something eager and welcoming. Then he remembered Marian's taunts, and his mouth hardened. After a moment, he drawled, "There was something you wanted, Miss Porter?"

Lois's green eyes widened. An odd expression came into them. "You are in a mood, aren't you? What' wrong? I thought you were the friendly type."

The half-derisive note that he was accustomed to hearing in her voice came back on the last words. She was beginning to smile again, with the assurance that she never lost for long. Suddenly her arrogance made Ted furious. He put his fists on his hips, and looked her up and down slowly. His mouth slanted in an insolent almost-grin. He said, "Did you?"

Then, feeling completely master of the situation, he started to turn away. He heard Lois's startled laugh. And she put a quick hand on his arm. "For goodness' sake, why the strong, silent act? Have I done something?"

She pouted prettily. And her eyes were suddenly interested, alive, almost appealing. Ted stared at her. He felt a sense of exultation.

But he kept a careful poker face. He said casually, "Done something? Not that I know of. I just happen to be busy."

She tilted her head on one side, looking up at him flirtatiously. Then she laughed again. "Big business man, eh?" But her voice wasn't derisive.

After a moment, she went on, "About that date you asked me for yesterday—I'm unexpectedly free tonight. Would you care to take me somewhere?"

HER MOUTH was soft and inviting. Ted's blood pounded, and again he had that feeling of exultation. At last, a date with Lois Porter!

But he kept his face expressionless. He pretended to consider. "Tonight? Yes, that would be okay. What time?"

"Eight or so," Lois told him softly. She was still looking at him in an appealing way. Ted had a wild desire to seize her

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in his arms. With an almost superhuman effort, he kept himself from doing so, however. Now he suddenly understood the way to play it with Lois—act indifferent. He could have shouted with the new sense of power the realization gave him.

With a lingering smile, Lois strolled away. He laughed, low. "Did it!" he exclaimed to himself "At last." Then his gray eyes narrowed. So that was how to treat a girl like Lois Porter, eh? Act tough and hard-to-get. He laughed again, and there was a new arrogance in the sound. Things were going to be easy from now on. Very, very easy.

The rest of the day went like a breeze. Filled with that sense of power, Ted was a ball of fire when it came to selling. He was almost smugly satisfied with himself by the time five o'clock arrived, and it was time to go home.

Unlocking the door of his apartment, he heard the sound of the radio in Marian's apartment across the hall. He bit his lip. For a moment, he felt a cold touch of loneliness. He and Marian had been friends for six months, ever since he first came to San Francisco. Now there was anger between them. Then he shrugged. It wasn't his fault that she had blown up in his face—for what crazy woman's reason, heaven only knew! And he certainly wasn't going to go over and ring her door bell, and humbly beg her to take him back on the old basis. No, she had started this fight between them. Any overtures toward peace had to come from her.

If it mattered. Personally, he didn't think it did. He had a date with Lois Porter, at long last, and who was Marian Stevens, anyway? Just a bad-tempered little blonde, who needed taking down a peg or two. He didn't have time for that, and even if he'd had time, the project wouldn't have interested him. Let Marian learn sense in her own way—if she could.

He whistled determinedly as he broiled his dinner steak. It didn't come out so well, but he wouldn't let himself think of the way Marian broiled steaks, so they'd melt in your mouth.

He showered, put on his new dark suit with the pin-stripe, a white shirt, and his pet dark blue tie. A gray snap-brim hat completed the ensemble, and Ted felt really sharp as he left the apartment.

Then his mouth tightened as he saw that Marian was standing by the elevator. For a moment he wanted to retreat but it was too late. She'd already seen him. So he strode forward and stopped beside her. Deciding to carry the whole thing off with an air he said breezily, "Hi! Stepping out?"

She didn't look as though she were going on a date though. She had on a casual sport coat and wore no hat. Her soft mouth was drooping a little and her blue eyes were tired.

She didn't answer, just looked him over from very polished shoes to the snap-brim tilted at a jaunty angle. Then she said in an odd tone "Date?"

It was a perfect opening. Ted almost preened himself. "Yes. With Lois Porter."

It was as though shock hit her blue eyes. Then she narrowed them so that he couldn't see their expression. She said, "Well!"

There was a moment of strange silence. Then she went on, "How did this miracle come about?"

He opened his mouth to answer, but before he could do so, her swift, half-violent voice continued, "I know. You got down on your knees before the lovely Lois. You said, 'Date me, or I die!' And she, taking pity—"

Something exploded inside Ted. He caught her by the shoulders suddenly. He shook her. He said furiously, "You little devil!"

He wanted to beat her, but she was very small in his big-handed grasp. There was one way to punish a woman, though.

He kissed her. He kissed her as in-

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sultingly as he could, over and over. And then, as abruptly as he had seized her, he let her go.

THEY STOOD staring at each other. Marian lifted her hand to her mouth, with a strangely terrible gesture. Terrible, because it was so groping, so bewildered. And then, sobbing, she turned and ran down the hall to the door of her apartment, let herself in.

Alone, Ted took out his handkerchief, and wiped the lipstick from his mouth. He felt upset and angry. Why did women always put on such a show, make you feel like a heel, when all you had done was give them what they'd asked for? He swore softly under his breath. Then he jabbed the elevator-bell viciously . . .

He drove to the Porter home in almost an automatic fashion, frowning unhappily. When he got there, Lois opened the front door. She said, "Hi, strong-and-silent. Isn't it wonderful? I'm all ready to go."

She looked really marvelous. Her dance dress was filmy black, her hat was all black sequins, and she wore gleaming green earrings that matched her laughing eyes. Slowly, Ted took in the insolent, piratical charm of her. He waited for his heart to beat fast. And he felt horribly let down when his blood maintained its normal tempo.

What in blazes was wrong with him? He scowled. He wasn't reacting right at all. His lack of animation made him angry.

Lois was wearing a black velvet coat. Ted's hands touched her bare white shoulders as he helped her put it on. It amazed him that the contact with her warm skin did not send a more violent thrill through him than it did. And the scent of her perfume was pleasant, but not intoxicating.

He took her to a small, vivid night-club on Geary, called La Parisienne. A mural of can-can dancers around the walls made for gayety, but, oddly enough, Ted couldn't whip up a gay mood. Lois was in high spirits, flirting with him openly and laughingly, but he had to fight to respond.

Again he grew angry at himself. Here he had a date with a girl he'd been crazy about for two months, and he wasn't enjoying it. It didn't make sense.

Lois didn't appear to notice anything wrong, though. Or perhaps the touch of remoteness in his manner intrigued her. At any rate, she seemed to be having a perfectly wonderful time.

She was a fascinating girl. She was full of life and challenge, completely stimulating. No man could ask for a more satisfying companion for an evening's fun. And yet. . . .

The hours went by, somehow. Ted was glad when the hands of his wristwatch pointed at midnight, and he could, without being completely rude, suggest that it was time for him to take Lois home.

She pouted a little, but with a funny casualness, he grinned. "Hey, baby, you may be a lady of leisure, but I'm just a working guy. After all, your dad *does* hire me to sell his cars, you know."

Lois looked up at him under half-lowered lashes. "What's more important, me or my dad's old cars?" she needled him.

But he wouldn't rise to the bait. He stood up firmly, and put her coat around her shoulders. "Honey, there'll be lots of other nights," he said masterfully. "But for tonight, this is it."

Driving her home, he knew that she was still intrigued by his independent attitude where she was concerned. He should have felt triumphant. But he didn't!

When he said good night to her, she lifted her mouth invitingly. He bent and kissed her, gathering her softness close.

The kiss was pleasant, but that was all. He responded just enough to make the

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response mutual—and had to force himself to do even that.

Lois didn't appear to notice that there was anything missing, though. When he let her go, she looked up at him with a waiting smile. Ted knew she was expecting him to ask for another date.

He started to do just that. But somehow the words that came out were "'Night, baby. Had a swell time. Be seeing you."

Then he turned and almost ran down the brief flight of steps to the sidewalk.

TED WAS swearing under his breath as he wove through traffic on his way home. The evening had been a complete flop, as far as he was concerned. For two months, he'd wanted nothing more than to date Lois Porter. Now he'd done it. And his reaction was, "So what?"

He snapped on the light in his living room, lit a cigarette, and began walking the floor. His anger was gathering to a climax now. What a rotten, disappointing evening it had been. And suddenly he knew why. The quarrel with Marian had put him in a fiendish mood. She'd really stirred him up—but good.

He sat down on the couch, scowling furiously. He could just see a picture of what the next day would be like. He'd be ready to bite the head off of anybody who looked at him sidewise. And that certainly was going to be a help to him at work. Sam Porter didn't put up with temperament. One wrong move, and Ted Barron would be out on the street, minus a job.

He crushed out his cigarette viciously. He stood up. Might as well get to bed, anyway. Maybe a good night's sleep would put him back on keel.

But instead of turning toward the bedroom, he found himself moving toward the outer door, crossing the hall. The light was still on in Marian's apartment. He rang the door bell, long and hard.

For a moment, there was no sound inside the apartment. Then slow footsteps came toward the door. It opened, and Marian stood there, staring at him.

Her cheeks colored hotly. Then she went almost completely white. She snapped, "What's the idea of ringing my bell at this hour?"

Her tone made him furious. So she thought she could push him around some more, eh? With one brusque movement, he strode inside, and closed the door.

He should have felt pity for her littleness, but instead that fierce anger inside him increased. He said between his teeth, "I'd like to break you in two. You really loused things up for me tonight, baby!"

Her chin went higher. She said, "I don't know what you're talking about. Do you?"

He stepped forward and caught her by the shoulders. "Don't I, sweetheart? Then I'll explain. That fight with you put me all off keel. I had a rotten time tonight. I—"

Now her blue eyes were as fiery as his gray ones. She cut in contemptuously, "So I got the little boy all upset, did I? He couldn't enjoy himself with the lovely Lois; and it's all my fault. Well, isn't that just too bad!" She laughed wildly. "I didn't know you were such a delicate flower."

Angrily, Ted jerked her close. He'd stop her taunting words, he'd show her. His mouth found hers in a violent, long, kiss.

SHE FOUGHT, but he held her. It was ridiculously easy, she was a tiny thing. And then, suddenly, something like an electric shock went through Ted. His whole body relaxed in astonishment, his arms falling to his sides.

Freed so abruptly, Marian almost fell. Then she caught herself, and stepped back. Her whole body was shaking, and

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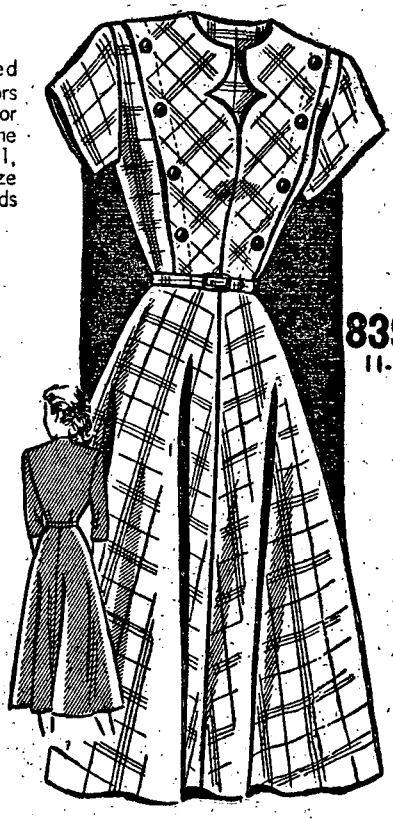
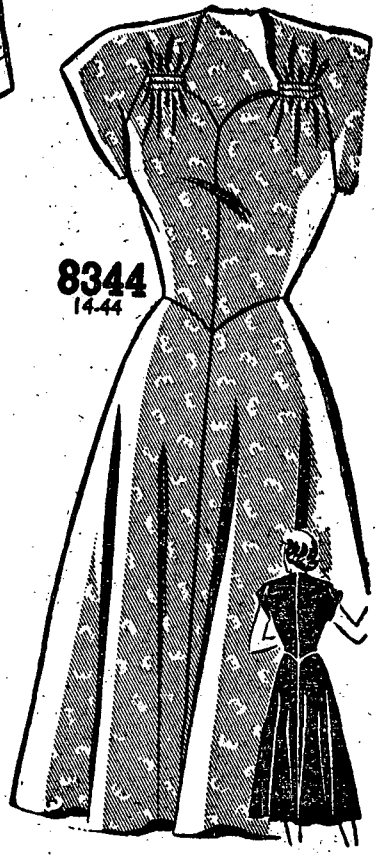
Dress Patterns

8392 This well styled frock for juniors will be ideal for dates or shopping sprees. Note the parade of buttons. Sizes 11, 12, 13, 14, 16 and 18. Size 12, short sleeve, 4⅞ yards of 39-inch.



8307 A dainty little warm weather frock for tiny girls with wing sleeves and ruffle trimming. Panties to match. Sizes 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 years. Size 2, dress, 1⅞ yards of 35 or 39-inch; panties, ½ yard.

8344 A beautifully simple dress for women with soft feminine touches that please. Size 14, 16, 18, 20; 40, 42 and 44. Size 16, 4⅞ yards of 35-inch.



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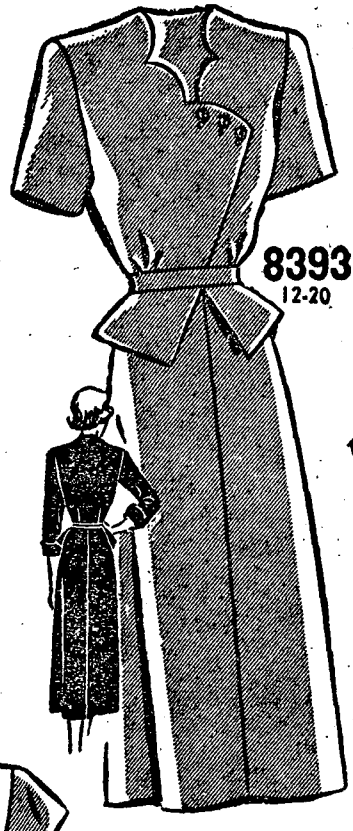

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A new moon meant luck, Rex told Vicky. But she spelled it l-o-v-e.

Enchanted Moon

By Nancy Crosby

VICKY WAS dancing with Tod Wilder when Rex came in. She had been a mere bobby-soxer during the war, but she still remembered what he had looked like in uniform.

He was Rexfield Scott, ex-Air Force, plus a Presidential citation. Now he had crashed to utter defeat, because Mona Ward had jilted him. It made Vicky feel a litle sick when she thought about it.

Rex was tall, lean, broad-shouldered, dark as an Arab. His eyes were black and he had a cool ironic mouth. Vicky told herself warningly that he would be a dangerous man with whom to play. But that idea only quickened her breath, and sent her thoughts racing.

Of course she was still young; only twenty. Rex still might not consider her worth noticing. But there was no law against trying, was there? There were men who thought her pretty keen.

Tod looked down at her suddenly, then his arm tightened, and he whirled her around. "No, no, baby," he admonished. "That lad's not for the kindergarten. Come have a drink. It's less risky."

Standing with him at the bar of the familiar old Country Club, she admitted to herself that Tod might be right. But deep in her heart something dared her. Rex was leaning against the doorway of the big lounge now. She looked at him steadily. Suddenly he was looking back at her, his dark eyes alert. Their glances locked and held. Then the music began again, and he was edging his way through the crowd. Her heart thumped a bit faster as he reached her, but she smiled at him coolly.

Outwardly Victoria Harding was as modern as tomorrow. But deep inside, she was as romantic as her own great-grandmother. And if a girl was romantic—well, right now Rex Scott had everything that a dreamboat needed.

In the first place, Vicky told herself, he was dangerously lonely. That made any man doubly vulnerable. She raised her eyes slowly and looked at him over the rim of her glass.

"Hello!" She put a soft emphasis on the little greeting. "You're Rex Scott, aren't you? I remember you, though you've probably forgotten me. You used to trail around with my older sis-

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"For the sake of old days, maybe you'll dance with me," he said. "It would be charity, I assure you."

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ter's crowd. She's married now, and lives in Chicago. I'm Vicky Harding."

She caught a warning look from Tod, but she didn't heed it. Rex was taking her glass away from her and setting it on the bar. "Then for the sake of old days, maybe you'll dance with me. It would be charity, I assure you. I've been away so long that even this club seems strange." His gaze warmed slowly.

Tod's warning was audible this time, but Rex already had swept Vicky into the crowd of dancers. She let herself drift to the music, not bothering to talk.

Then Rex jerked her out of her dreaming by saying abruptly, "I wonder if that's true. I mean I wonder if a man's luck could turn; that he'd really find a girl who'd make all those things possible again."

At first Vicky didn't get him. Then she realized he was talking about the song. And suddenly she lifted her eyes and met his squarely. "I suppose a man could try," she told him softly.

For an instant he looked at her gravely, then all at once he grinned. Grim and a bit sardonic, maybe, but still a smile.

"Well then, what are we waiting for?"

Before Vicky could think up an answer to that one, they were out on the veranda, and Rex was saying to a club attendant, "My coat, please, and Miss Harding's." And she was automatically fishing in her gold evening bag for her check.

His car had been parked in the drive. Once settled in it Vicky let herself relax, pulling her mink coat closer around her, and watching Rex's hands on the wheel. He had nice hands. His profile was dark against the starlight sky. She began to be glad she had on her newest formal. It was pretty special, with its bodice of jade-green and pink striped ribbon, with tiny matching straps. The skirt was jade-green tulle, very long and full, making her waist look tiny. She had a small knot of the tulle holding three pink rosebuds in her hair. She looked at Rex again. His nearness was beginning to do queer things to her blood-pressure.

IT STARTED her thinking about Mona Ward. How ever could a man like Rex be taken in by Mona's icy beauty? Why did men go for red hair and devilish green eyes, plus a lush red mouth that never spoke the truth? Did men ever really love a siren? What was it that held men loyal to women who hadn't the slightest conception of the meaning of the word?

The answers might be interesting, mightn't they? It also might be thrilling to discover what Rex's reactions to another sort of girl would be. Maybe if Vicky played her cards right, she might find an answer.

But as the night went on, she found the game was entirely in his hands. They did Manhattan from end to end and halfway back. And from the first minute, Rex made love to her. It was adroit, expert love, too smoothly done. Vicky might be young, but not so young that she couldn't recognize that, or realize that it had her definitely disarmed. She couldn't go out after a man in a big way, when he already was dancing with his cheek against her hair, or deliberately disturbing her heartbeats; a man who was making the game much too fast for her, and doing it deliberately too.

Anger and humiliation swept her. Rex so obviously had seen through her intended game, and was beating her to it. He had no intention of letting any girl take him. He still carried his torch for Mona, and even if it made him wretched, he wanted no substitutes.

But he was quite willing to take on a pretty blonde for a night's whirl, as long as she understood the set-up. That seemed to be the answer.

Okay, then she would pretend it suited her too. She let herself get gayer and

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brighter as the night went on. She played up to Rex so well that once or twice she saw him give her a startled speculative glance. And at the Blue Moon Club, he reached and took her drink away from her.

It was just after he had bought her green orchids at the Cavern D'Or, that she finally decided to take things into her own hands and go home.

She got up from the table and pulled on her long green velvet gloves. "It's been a wonderful party, Rex. It's made me feel you're really an old friend, even if I was just a kid when you went away. It's also nice to have gone on a party with you like this. But I think we should be going back to Long Hills now, don't you?"

It was a casual little speech. Vicky was rather proud of it. And Rex accepted her suggestion of going by rising lazily and putting her coat around her. Then suddenly he caught her shoulders and turned her to face him.

"Look, small fry," he said carefully, "any man who thinks he could be just a friend to you is a complete idiot. That's why we aren't going to see each other again—if you get what I mean. You could be much too easy a habit to acquire."

An unreasonable flare of anger blazed through Vicky. "Don't worry. I can take care of myself," she told him sharply.

For the first time, he smiled at her. But it was brief and rueful. "Sorry, angel. But that's the way it's got to be. Come on, let's go."

Yet at her own door, he bent suddenly and brushed her mouth with his. "Forgive me, infant. I didn't mean to be brutal." His voice was queerly gentle. The next instant he was gone.

She stood for a second, watching the lights of his car sweeping away down the drive. Then she unlocked the front door and went in cautiously. She didn't want to awaken her father, not right now. Dad was so solicitous when she stayed out late. Vicky didn't blame him. It must have been hard for a man to bring up a girl all alone. Divorce was a miserable thing for all concerned. She thought of her beautiful cold-hearted mother and the hard-faced man she was married to now. How did love turn into things like that—like her father and mother, and Rex and Mona?

But it didn't have to, did it? In her room she unpinned her orchids and stared down at them thoughtfully. Deep in her heart a torch began to blaze, a torch to light a crusade and she knew then that the minute she was up in the morning, she was going to get Rex on the phone.

SHE WAS a trifle surprised at the courage it needed. When her mother's old butler answered, her knees actually went weak. Then she was tense as the man said, "Yes, Mr. Rex is here. He never goes to town on Saturdays."

It seemed strange to think of Rex going to town at all. He so very definitely belonged with planes, that she couldn't imagine him in an office. Yet he'd told her last night that was the reason he had re-opened the old home here in Long Hills. The aircraft people he worked for had transferred him East, so he might pick up more of the office routine.

His voice on the phone startled her out of her thoughts. He sounded acutely displeased. "Now see here, infant, I told you last night that—"

Vicky grabbed her courage again. "Yes, I know," she cut in brightly. "But it's such a heavenly day, I thought you might forget that silly ultimatum, and take me for a round of golf. I'm good; really I am."

The phone was dead for a second, then he said carefully, "What about that nice lad you were dancing with at the club last night? Doesn't he play golf?"

"Tod Wilder?" She registered deep

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surprise. "Please don't get the idea Tod's my property. He's just a hang-over from prep-school days. He still plays the field —of girls, I mean. And he loathes golf," Her voice lowered a trifle. "Besides I'd rather have you."

The silence was longer this time. Vicky scarcely breathed. The curt abruptness of Rex's answer took the starch out of her knees. "Okay, I'll pick you up in about fifteen minutes."

He hung up with a bang that made her ear ring.

He looked even more wonderful in tweeds than in evening clothes. He got out of the car and came around to open the door for her. She loved that. It made her feel fragile and cherished.

But when Rex got the car going, he turned and looked at her sternly. "You really shouldn't have called me. You know that, don't you?"

It stopped her for a second. Then she smiled at him sweetly. "Yes, of course I know it. *You* should have called *me*, and asked how I was. It would have been much nicer that way."

He stared at her as if she'd hit him. Then he put back his dark head and laughed. Real laughter this time; deep and warm in his throat. "Okay youngster, you win," he told her wryly. "But I'll beat you, over there on the course, to pay you off. You see if I don't."

He did just that. By the ninth hole, Vicky was ready to give up. It made her furious. It shouldn't have happened. Vicky Harding had the lowest handicap rating in all the women's matches. She just was off her game today. And it was Rex's fault.

It was the way the muscles in his broad flexible shoulders moved under his jacket, when he swung for a drive. It was the intent way he stood and watched her tee off. It was the crazy magnetism of him, as he walked beside her, the way he looked down at her as if she were amusing or something. It played havoc with a lot more than her game.

SHE CONCEDED the ninth hole, and went to sit on a bench by a nearby tree. She lifted her lashes and looked speculatively at Rex. Maybe she could play a better game this way.

"It's no use," she said ruefully. "No girl would have a chance with a man like you. I mean the game you play. So why prolong the agony? Another nine holes wouldn't change anything." She moved a little on the bench, and Rex sat down.

It was one of those soft blue and gold days that so often slip into the tag end of winter, a day filled with the first promise of spring. The sun was bright on the shining smoothness of Rex's short black hair, touching it with blue lights. He reached and took hold of Vicky's wrists. "Look, small fry, you still must know I shouldn't have come today."

She turned her hands palm up, in his grasp and regarded them intently. "Didn't you want to come?" she asked softly.

He gave her a mirthless smile. "You should know the answer to that one too," he said wearily. "But there isn't any right answer to us, darling. There never will be. You should know that, even more definitely."

"Why should I?" she asked bluntly.

He said quietly, "Because I'm twenty-seven years old. I've been through a war. Plus that, I've been in love before. You should have a new love; shining and young and terribly real. I'm not even sure what sort of love I could give you—if any."

Vicky looked off across the rolling golf course, her heart doing a queer unsteady tattoo. The fairways were still brown. There were even patches of snow lying here and there. But, in the protected places, there were faint tinges of green, a poignant promise of good things to come.

She turned back to Rex. "Do you still

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love Mona?" she demanded violently.

It was as if she had shut a door between them. His eyes went dark, expressionless. "I just told you there was no answer to you and me. There's no answer to that question either." He got up. "Come on, let's go."

He plainly meant to take her home. But at the club house, she turned and faced him, swiftly stubborn. "I'm hungry," she told him tersely. "They always have big plates of pancakes with maple syrup on Saturdays. I'm staying for lunch."

He stared back at her impatiently. Then slowly, tender hopelessness slid across his mouth. "Ye gods!" he said defeatedly, and walked her along the veranda.

In the women's locker room, she stared at herself in the mirror. "You're a fool," she told her reflection bitterly. "You weren't fair or decent. You had no business to ask a question like that in the first place. And in the second place you've defeated yourself by overplaying your hand. Now you'll have to face Rex through a luncheon that you've practically forced on him. You certainly are slipping, Vicky Harding, and I don't mean maybe." Pancakes and maple syrup? She never felt less like eating them, in her whole life. Not even her favorite table in the sunny dining-room, nor the actual sight of pancakes, brought back her appetite.

Rex ate with a detached enjoyment that infuriated her. Altogether, it was a horrible meal. Oh yes, they talked. After all they were civilized well-mannered people. But it was horrible just the same.

She was glad when they were in the car going home. Or was she? That promise of spring still lingered. A lovely nostalgic day's end that needed to be shared. Particularly the pale new moon in a primrose sky.

Vicky thought, self-mocking, Oh I was so wise, so certain I could reach out and take Rex Scott, just like that! I was so sure I could make him forget Mona and want me. Then I had to go haywire and ask if he still loved her. Now he's scarcely speaking to me. She looked away across the twilight hills, and bit down hard on her crumpling mouth. Then suddenly Rex had stopped the car.

HE PUT his hands on her shoulders. "Turn around, infant. You're looking at it over the wrong shoulder—the new moon for luck, I mean." His voice had a strange unsteadiness.

Luck? She stared at the new moon miserably. There wasn't any luck for a dumb little blonde like her. Not with a man like Rex.

She stirred impatiently in his hold. In spite of her control, a tired little sob escaped her. And in an instant everything changed. Rex pulled her against him and kissed her. A completely crazy kiss, touched with a tender fury, and a worried questioning. "Vicky, will you listen to me?"

She nodded, and looked at the moon again. Maybe it could bring luck. Rex rushed on, as if now he'd started something he couldn't stop. "Maybe you had a right to ask about me and Mona. Maybe I should have tried to tell you how I felt about her, or how I feel about her now. You see a man comes out of a war, wanting a lot of crazy things. And there stands a girl like Mona, slim and golden and waiting. I'd known her before I went into the Service, but she didn't even interest me then. But when I came back to Long Hills before I took that flying job in California, she was still around, and she seemed different. Or maybe I was. Anyway when she played hard to get, I fell for it. When I went back to the coast, we were engaged. If I made good at my job out there, I was to come back and we were to be married. You

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probably remember what happened when I came back."

"She was already married to that copper-mining man and living in South America, wasn't she?"

"Right, darling. So can't you see why I'm all wrong for you. A thing like that takes the gilt off love, makes a guy so damn unsure."

Vicky pulled away from him and faced him. "All girls aren't like Mona."

"Again you're so right, darling. I've found that out. In fact I suspected it, before I went back out West. I saw you around town with the younger crowd, and asked somebody who you were. When they told me, I remembered, and almost let myself meet you, almost but not quite. I still felt I was through with any sort of emotion. But when I went back to my job, I took the memory of you along with me. You were the first person I looked for when I finally came back to Long Hills."

"Rex! Oh Rex, dearest!"

He gave her a weary little grin. "I know, dear. But a man should be sure he's doing the right thing." Then he broke off sharply and pulled her close. "I still should stay away from you." He whispered it against her hair, and Vicky laughed.

"But you aren't going to, are you?" she demanded brazenly. "Not—not now that you've really found how nice I am?"

"You young vandal!" His voice was husky, shaken, and all her shining belief in herself was back. She could have a man like Rex. She, little Vicky Harding, had made him believe in real love. She'd made him forget Mona! With a blissful sigh, she let him kiss her, thrilling swiftly to the utter possession of his mouth.

The new moon's promise of spring could be more than a promise now. Spring would really come, over and over, year after year, with Rex.

It was a long while before they started home. At her door, she looked up at him, her eyes all warm appeal that was touched with teasing. "Tonight's the last gala dance of the winter season, at the club, I mean. If I took you with me—well then people would guess that you and I —I mean, they'd know for sure that it isn't Mona any more."

Rex met her questioning with dark amused eyes. "And if I kiss you in the middle of the dance floor during the last dance, everybody will know we're engaged. Honey, I haven't been away from Long Hills long enough to have forgotten *that* good old custom. I'll call for you shortly after nine. But don't you think maybe we better tell your father first?"

THE LAUGHTER died out of Vicky's eyes. "He wouldn't want to hear it," she told him drearily. "He still doesn't believe that any love can last. No Rex, please don't tell him just yet."

With a rush of tenderness, he caught her close. "Okay, darling, so we'll just elope and spend the rest of our lives showing him how wrong he is."

"You're sweet." She smiled at him. "I'll wear my prettiest dress tonight."

The dress wasn't new. It just seemed appropriate. Pale blue chiffon with an off-shoulder neckline, a long graceful skirt, a silver sash. She added platinum nylons and silver ballerinas. She hunted out an old flower perfume, simple yet subtle.

When Rex came, he just stood and looked at her. She stood on tiptoe and lifted her mouth for his kiss. "Thanks," she said softly, and let him slip her into her coat.

In the car, she put her head against his shoulder, still not minding his silence. Somehow she knew his doubts were gone at last. This would be her night—hers and Rex's.

She was even more sure when he guided her out onto the dance floor at

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the club, and eyebrows went up. She knew people were thinking of Mona, and she was glad. Later the raised eyebrows changed to knowing smiles, as Rex cut in on her every dance. When he wasn't dancing with her, he leaned against the wall and watched.

Once she snuggled her blonde head into his shoulder and whispered wickedly, "Maybe you won't have to kiss me during the last dance. They're suspecting things already."

He swung her into a walk and looked down at her with mock belligerence. "See here, if you think I'm going to be cheated out of that kiss and all the back-slapping and champagne, you're crazy. When I get engaged, I demand all the trimmings, or else."

It was on her tongue to ask if he'd had them with Mona. But she'd grown wise about foolish questions. She just smiled at him and said sweetly, "Okay darling. And as the next dance is the last, I'd better go fix my face."

She felt him looking after her as she trailed away toward the powder room, and her heart gave an upward lilt. It would be so wonderful, always going places with Rex. Having him stand at her elbow when she met new people. Hearing him say carelessly, "Have you met my wife?"

Rex's wife! Her breath grew uneven. With Rex for always! Nights by the fire, in his house on the hill! Other new moons, tilted above an open window.

She almost stumbled on the sill of the powder room. Then she hurried on. The mirrors were crowded. Laughter greeted her. A pretty brunette called out, "Well Vicky darling, it looks as if it were all over but the shouting. Imagine you capturing Rex Scott! What have you got that the rest of us haven't?"

She wanted to answer with her heart on her lips, "I've got Rex." But she just made a little face at her tormentor, and went about finding powder and lipstick.

She finished quickly and went back along the corridor between powder room and the big club lounge.

ONE SIDE of this corridor was lined with French windows that opened onto the terrace. In summer it was bright out there, big wicker chairs, gay umbrellas, little tables for drinks, great Chinese jars of blue hydrangeas. Now it was empty, deserted. Vicky stopped suddenly. Or was it? Like someone watching a tense scene on the screen, she stood staring at what happened now.

A car door had slammed, out there in the darkness. Now a girl was coming up the terrace steps. A tall, beautifully slender girl. Her silver-fox cape trailed back from her bare shoulders. Her white satin dress revealed every line of her exquisite figure.

Vicky caught her breath. So Mona Ward was back! Only she wasn't Mona Ward now. She was Mrs. Something-or-other.

She stopped for a second, and the old wrought-iron lantern above her head shone bright on her red hair and her searching green eyes. If ever Vicky had seen a woman on a prowl, she was it!

Suddenly Vicky was thinking of what Rex had said about her. A man comes out of a war, and there stands a girl like Mona; slim and golden and waiting.

But Mona wasn't golden now. She was all smooth and white and devilishly innocent. And as Vicky watched, the glass door from the lounge swung open and Rex walked out onto the terrace. Mona wasn't waiting this time. She was walking across the flag-stones and standing in front of Rex. She was saying, "I told you you'd be here when I came. Oh Rex, I've been such a fool!"

And Rex was taking her uplifted face between his lean brown hands and kissing her—a long hard kiss that sent firey

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little ripples along Vicky's veins, and, for an awful moment, ripped apart all those long valiant years of fighting for her belief in love; the gallant belief that she'd somehow kept, in spite of her mother's going, and her father's bitter cynicism. She bit down hard on her quivering mouth. What had been the use of it any of it?

Then she looked at Rex again, and her chin came up. No sir! Mona wasn't going to get Rex back! He belonged to Victoria Harding. She was going to keep him. Mona could go back to her own man. She could stick to him, or not. It didn't matter. But Vicky was putting up a fight for Rex and the way she loved him.

Rex had let Mona go now. He stood looking down at her, and Vicky couldn't tell what was in his eyes. But Mona laughed. She walked to the terrace steps and stood there lighting a cigarette. Finally she sent a dainty smoke ring into the still night air, gave Rex a slow amused look over her shoulder, and sauntered off along the path below the steps.

Rex came directly to Vicky. He pushed the long window further open, and came in, then stood looking down at her, his dark eyes quite expressionless. "I suppose you saw?"

Vicky lifted her lashes and said steadily, "Yes. But if you think it's going to change anything, you're mistaken."

"What?" There was a strange incredulous twist to the sharp question.

"You heard me." Vicky was still steady. "We're announcing our engagement in about two minutes. There's the music now. We better go in."

"But Vicky!"

She gave him a queer little smile. "Come along, darling. Remember this is our dance."

THEY WERE playing *People Will Say We're in Love*. They had played it for years at parties like this. So far nobody seemed to have found anything better. Vicky realized that the crowd was waiting for them to start the dancing. By this time the whole thing was being taken for granted. Even the boys in the band were laughing.

Just for a breath, she felt the hesitation in Rex. Then his arm was around her, his cheek against hers, and they were dancing as if they already were one person. The rest of the dancers began circling around them teasing Vicky, daring Rex.

He looked down at her. "You still sure you want to go on with it?" His voice was unsteady and very low.

She flung back her head. "I'm very sure, Rex."

Then the music was trailing softly into *I Love You Truly*, and Rex's mouth was against hers.

Just for an instant Vicky tensed. Then she let herself go, and kissed him with her heart on her lips. She felt a hard breath go through him as he pulled her closer.

"Vicky?" He was questioning again, his eyes probing hers.

"Uh huh," she said softly, and then the crowd was upon them. The band boys seemed to forget this was supposed to be the last dance. They swung into another tune. All the men were cutting in on Vicky, sliding her from one to the other. All the girls were trying for dances with Rex. It was riding up to the usual wildness that had accompanied these parties. And somehow Vicky was managing to coast along with it, shutting back the fear in her heart, trying to close her heart to the vision of Rex and Mona together. Trying to tell herself that Mona had gone, that she had lost.

It was just as the crazy lad she was dancing with had swung her up onto the bar and begun to call for more toasts, that Vicky realized she was wrong.

From over there in the big doorway,

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Mona was surveying the proceedings with amused contemptuous eyes.

Vicky caught a shaken breath, but before she could move, two things happened. Tod Wilder was walking across to Mona, and swinging her peremptorily onto the dance floor. And Rex had reached and taken Vicky down, his hands hard and urgent on her slim waist.

"We're getting out of here," he told her tersely.

She went, just as she'd done that first night. But now her heart was crumpling, for Mona laughed. Her words came across the soft music like the slash of a knife. "Rex darling, you're afraid to stay!"

In the sudden stillness Rex laughed too. Then he picked Vicky up. She could actually feel the stunned silence they left behind them.

In the next few minutes they were in his car, racing along the old back road away from the country club.

Vicky sat in the far corner of the seat, watching Rex's face. The soft light from the instrument board, brought out the strong dark planes of it, that unreadable blackness of his eyes, the strange quietness of his mouth. She couldn't tell what he was thinking, yet somehow her courage returned, her unwanted fear gone. When he stopped the car where they had stopped this afternoon, she didn't draw away from the arm he put around her.

He switched off the lights. And out there across the hills it was very dark; the strange opaque darkness that comes just before the dawn, the stillness of a countryside not yet awake.

"There's no new moon now," Rex said, expressionless.

She lifted her lashes. "There will be," she told him confidently. "It always comes, over and over."

With a quick broken sound in his throat, Rex drew her into his arms. His mouth was wry, contrite, and very tender now.

"Honey, I'm a churl, a cad, a louse—all the terms that mean a man's a stinker. No, wait and listen to me!"

HE TILTED HER head and brushed his mouth across her parted lips. "I meant to explain Mona right away, honest I did. But when you looked at me and practically told me you'd trust me anyway, I just couldn't resist savoring it awhile longer. I suddenly wanted terribly to have our night without explaining. I wanted to get back my faith in love. Damn it!" He stared at her ruefully. "I know I'm being corny. But that's the only way I know how to say it. I wanted so terribly to feel sure you still believed, in spite of seeing me kiss Mona."

Vicky gave him a sidewise glance. She said slowly, "Well, I don't mind telling you that you took an awful chance. I'd like to know just why you kissed her like that."

Rex put back his head and laughed. "Darling, you completely slay me. But as that's just what I brought you out here to tell you, I'll ignore your lightening changes of attitude."

He pushed her head down against his shoulder. "It seems, angel child, that the rich Mrs. Cuyler decided that there was no percentage in being rich in a South American mining camp, luxurious as those places are nowadays. She decided to be rich the alimony way. Then she heard somewhere that my promotion with the aircraft company might run into five figures, and suddenly remembered how she'd loved good old Long Hills, and, incidentally, me. I'm not boring you, am I?"

Vicky said tersely, "No, you're not. Hurry up and finish."

Rex grinned reminiscently. "When I came in from that game of golf this afternoon, I found her in my living room. I

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told her politely to get out. She went, but she bet I didn't dare meet her at the country club tonight, and kiss her on the terrace—just as I used to. I took her up on her dare, and won."

"Oh?" Vicky said skeptically. But her eyes were stars.

Rex nodded. "Darling, I did my most expert job, but that kiss didn't mean a thing."

"And when she came back to watch our party?"

He gave her a little shake. "I'm here, aren't I?"

And suddenly Vicky knew her faith still was intact; that except for a few agonizing moments, it always had been. But she had to have one more stab at Mona. "Tod was pretty decent, rescuing you like that. What would you have done, if he hadn't grabbed Mona?"

Rex's mouth went grim. "Darling, I hate to think. Somewhere in my other ego, there must be a desire to murder a red-headed woman. Mona will never know how near she came to being strangled, there on the dance floor."

Then, the laughter gone out of him, he caught Vicky close, his face against her hair, his voice unsteady.

"Darling, I was such a gosh-awful fool, being so sure I'd never love again, just because a girl like Mona made a cheap cynic of me. What if I hadn't found you? What do men do, without girls who believe the way you do? But honey, it wasn't entirely cynicism that made me act as I did. I truly did feel that I had no right to walk into your life. You were too young, too—"

Vicky's mouth twisted. "Maybe you should stop right there, Rex. I may seem that way to you. But I've been around. Dad's divorce opened my eyes to a lot of things. I was quite a cynic myself, for a while. Then I found I couldn't stand it. I just had to believe in—in things like the new moon. But you might as well know that I also went deliberately out to get you. It wasn't all sweet innocence. I planned it, and—well, you see what has happened."

Rex put strong fingers under her chin. "That's what you think, is it? Well listen here, baby. Remember I told you I'm twenty-seven. And a global war plus Mona is quite an education. I'd like you to know that it was only because, down underneath my uncertainty, I was pretty willing to be taken, that you finally broke me down."

Vicky's mouth, lifted to his, was very sweet. But her eyes were wicked and there was laughter in her heart. Even if there always would be a new moon, a girl had to smart enough to use it, didn't she? And she'd done pretty well.

With a soft little sigh, she finished what she'd begun. Her arms around Rex's neck, she whispered, "Darling I love you. I guess I always have. Now I know I always will, because in spite of your old age, you're still so beautifully young and handsome."

But suddenly Rex's kiss had stopped her boasting. It was a definitely masculine and very knowing kiss, a possessive kiss that also stopped her breath, and sent her heart into a very youthful, thrilling tailspin.

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The Pisces Personality

(For Those Born Between February 19th to March 20th)

THOSE BORN between February 19th and March 20th of each year are under the influence of mystic Pisces.

The occult symbol of this sign, the Fish bound together and headed in opposite directions, illustrates the quality of your inmost temperament. Gazing into the past and into the future, you are poised in the present while the stream of time flows past you. Events occur, things happen, people come and go, while you reflect deep within and draw into your consciousness their inmost meaning. It is for this reason that you must have freedom of thought and of movement so you can respond to the flow of events and interpret them in your spiritual awareness.

Flexible in thought, deft in action, tactful in your relations with others, you should always be in a position where you are dealing with many people. You can be a powerful, though at the same time a very subtle, influence in their lives.

Others think you are restless and casual, yet beneath this there is a keen mind, and an exceptional ability to understand the real meaning of financial and other problems. You have the answer to a question, whatever it may be, your intuition supplying the key without the necessity of slow thinking and study. You should depend on your intuition. Whenever a powerful impression rises to the surface of your mind it should be the central motive for what you are going to do.

An occasional change of job, new friends, and different forms of entertainment and enjoyment are advisable. Every time you adjust your life in this way you are stimulated to new enthusiasm in action. Try to avoid assuming permanent responsibility or long term duties.

You are deeply affectionate toward those you love, but at the same time you refuse to allow your emotional expression to be too restricted. You want and even need a stream of new friends, each one revealing a different facet of personality to you. People always like you, and it is for this reason that you can take a prominent part in social or organization activities. This may lead to opportunities in other fields of life, so use your vibrant personality to help you on your way toward the goals you have in mind.

The best marriage partner for Pisces is one born in Virgo, August 24th to September 22nd, or at any other time of the year with Virgo qualities dominant. Almost equally good are those born in Cancer, June 22nd to July 22nd or in Scorpio, October 24th to November 22nd. You need to be married to one who, like yourself, is aware of the

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real meaning of life. With a true affection locked in the depths of your secret heart the events of the external world can take a secondary place.

One danger for the Piscean is a tendency to carelessness. Your temperament makes this understandable, nevertheless you should keep it under control or it can lead to some difficulty when working with others. Limit heavy jobs, too long hours, nervous strain and sustained concentration, they are not good for you. Pay special attention to the possibility of eyestrain, and always see that you have well-fitting, comfortable shoes.

Yearly Forecast for Pisces

The coming year is a rather unusual one for Pisces. There are some highly favorable influences in effect, and some rather unfavorable ones as well.

Expansive influences are very long range, continuing through the following years, while restrictions are much shorter. Make your plans, therefore, on a big scale. You may make a start now, but do so slowly, being ready to work through preliminary difficulties. Later you can speed your efforts and may expect very favorable consequences.

This applies to a working job, your ambitions for more prestige and authority, social position, income, and your hopes in connection with the family.

The coming year is rather bad for entering a business partnership.

General health trends are on the upgrade. However, some restrictions are nearby, so do not neglect due health precautions. Take extra care during the end of February into March, April into early June, September, 1949, the last half of March, 1950. Do not overwork yourself.

Finances are generally stable during the coming year. Yet when money is in your possession do not take risks with it for quick profit. Save steadily, limit speculative risks. Do not take chances, and sign financial documents only if you know exactly what you are doing. Use discretion in spending during April, 1949, and January through March, 1950.

Social and personal interests are very favorable, and the coming year holds excellent prospects for personal happiness. Many new friends can come into your sphere, some of whom can benefit you in practical, business and financial terms. Be alert for opportunities coming to you through friends, especially the present to December, 1949.

General Forecast for March, 1949

The month starts rather slowly. The trend of most affairs is on a generally even basis, this continuing through the first half of March.

Finances are sound during this period. It is a good time for considering investments, real estate values and other assets. Buying and selling may be done, though the main purpose should be to transfer assets to where they would have more security and income. Do not speculate.

The 1st to 12th is excellent for owners of schools, teachers, owners and managers of theaters, insurance agents, actors, producers, and all those who sell some form of personal service to the public. You may start new ventures, aim to capitalize on current ones, push ahead, and seek more income and a wider field of action. Take the long term view.

The 1st to 12th also favors students, inventors, research workers and writers. Be on the alert for the new ideas that are floating around.

About the middle of the month conditions take a rather peculiar turn. General business affairs are becoming more sound and stable, but the personal side turns erratic. People become much more impulsive, restless, wanting action at any cost. This also continues to the end of the month. Anything new, any major change made, any disturbance from what has been settled, will be a source of trouble. This period is good for soldiers, detectives, salesmen and advertisers, but not for those who prefer peace, quiet and stability. Aviators should take no risks whatever, not even calculated ones, the 13th to 31st.

Check on the health and obtain necessary treatments the 1st to 14th.

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Also, the 15th to 19th is extremely accidental, and nearly as much so to the end of the month. Guard against tripping and falling the 15th to 21st; against accidents due to carelessness, automotive troubles, or to high speed travel, the 22nd to the end of the month.

Big scale parties may be held the 1st to 20th. Small personal parties are not advised the 2nd to 6th, or 13th to 17th.

New business partnerships may be started the 21st on. Farmers should hesitate about purchasing land or expensive machinery.

The real estate market may become increasingly active toward the end of the month, but use care if signing legal papers.

Your Forecast for March, 1949

ARIES

IF YOUR BIRTHDAY Comes Between MARCH 21 and APRIL 19

Watch general health conditions the first half of March. There are indications of less vitality, and consequently of less resistance to physical disorder.

From the 15th on, vitality remains a bit low but the indications also turn toward accidents. For the last half of the month be extra cautious in this respect. This aspect is a bad one, so be on the alert.

Defer meeting dear friends the 2nd to 6th. The period is very disappointing and even unhappy. Be prepared for a little bad news in connection with a friend.

Business trends are generally sound throughout the month. If you have business activities on hand with friends, talk things over the 7th to 12th, making plans for the time to come. Develop some new ideas.

Be sure not to act in a hurry the 15th to 21st. A new venture, a major change in home life or job interests, or anything else that upsets established connections, could lead you into a lot of trouble and wasted effort.

Do not spend too much, either for luxuries or necessities, all this month. Buy only what you need, doing so preferably the 7th to 12th, and 20th to 31st. Buying goods for sale, machinery or equipment for a business may be done all month, except the 15th to 21st.

TAURUS

IF YOUR BIRTHDAY Comes Between APRIL 20 and MAY 20

An important business letter may be written and sent at the beginning of March. This is best for writing about a new job, or for making a connection that could later lead to something for you.

An answer coming the 7th to 12th should be acknowledged immediately. This period is also excellent for an investment in a business, or to make an investigation about the true values of assets that you own.

There are, however, some rather adverse business influences present also, so if you do not seem to get anywhere by the 12th or 13th it may be wise to defer further action until the end of the month.

The whole field of friendships is stimulated all month, but at the same time conditions are most unreliable. There can be much interest, excitement, invitations and a chance to meet new friends, but unless you are tactful you may run into some conflict. Except for the dear ones you know well, others can be undependable and even antagonistic. There may be some gossip going around. Defer parties and invitations the 2nd to 6th, 13th to 17th, 19th to 23rd, and 29th to 31st.

If you hold a leading position in a social organization, stay well in the background the 1st to 20th. Conserve your social ambitions until later on.

The 13th to 23rd is a poor time for making changes in children's regime. At the same time they can be more restless and undecided in themselves.

Watch out for a tendency to money loss, waste or extravagance the 15th to 25th of the month.

GEMINI

IF YOUR BIRTHDAY Comes Between MAY 21 and JUNE 21

During March, job ambition can either push you ahead or pull you back, depending

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on the external opportunities that present themselves. The whole field of business is active, but somewhat uncertain.

You have extra energy this month. The main point to note is that if you act first you are very likely to make a mistake. While if you first carefully consider the possibilities for and against your expectations, and are alert to external trends, you can accomplish a great deal. Not the best time for starting a new job if you are untrained, but good if you have experience.

General activity rises to a climax the 15th to 25th. Watch out for a personal clash with a business associate at this time.

Personal letters to friends may be written the 1st to 12th, business letters the 7th to 12th and 20th to 28th.

Put your mind to work the 8th to 12th. This is the best time for considering and studying the potentialities of important moves or changes you may have on hand.

Social interests become increasingly active from the middle of the month on. You should have the opportunity to meet a lot of new people. Aim for leadership in group, political and other public fields, but be a little careful what you say in public the 29th to 31st.

The whole month is good for readjusting the budget, and cutting expenses. Do not speculate for profit, the judgment is not good enough at present. Have some cash on hand for an unexpected home expense around the middle of the month.

CANCER

IF YOUR BIRTHDAY
Comes Between
JUNE 22 and
JULY 22

Pay special attention to the budget and home expenses the 1st to 12th of March. You may also talk over with partner and come to definite decision on questions of moving, renting, buying or selling property.

Use great caution with correspondence the 13th to 17th. Incoming mail is apt to be disappointing, this is a very bad time for writing letters.

Trips for business the 1st to 15th can open up a new vista of action. Be ambitious and follow a progressive course in what you do.

Travel is very accidental the 16th to 20th. Use great caution if you go away, and do not drive at high speed.

If your life in general has fallen into a dull and humdrum routine that bores you, get ready to break out of the pattern the 20th on. A surge of energy brings added enthusiasm and magnetism, and you can utilize these to make a stronger impression.

Be a little skeptical of information or advice given you the last few days of the month. The judgment of others can be erratic, so that if you act on it you could make a mistake. Avoid signing legal documents.

LEO

IF YOUR BIRTHDAY
Comes Between
JULY 23 and
AUGUST 23

Money spent for luxuries, jewelry, special clothing or for the fulfillment of other wants the 1st to 6th of March could be partly wasted. While you may get what you desire, you are apt to find you have either paid too much, or goods do not live up to all your hopes.

In conjunction with partner, talk over and decide current questions relating to children the 7th to 12th.

The 13th to 17th is bad for general buying, or for signing money papers, especially those which commit you to long term future payments.

Be wary of friends with financial or other business propositions the 15th to 20th. Things are not what they seem to be. No matter how good an offer looks, seek the element of weakness that is likely to be somewhere beneath the surface.

Use care with medicines, chemicals, and anything of a poisonous nature the 15th to 25th. Watch that you do not make a mistake of some kind.

Arrange a short pleasure trip toward the end of the month. A trip taken with a loving friend could bring a deeper sympathy and understanding, drawing you closer together in warm friendship.

Even if you are asked for it, do not give financial advice to others the last few days of the month, and do not make money promises.

VIRGO

IF YOUR BIRTHDAY
Comes Between
AUGUST 24 and
SEPTEMBER 22

The first week of March is personally rather dull. Partner can disappoint you in

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some way. Do not expect too much but be ready to go along with things as they are for the time being. Take things easy, and use the time to catch up on some dull but necessary jobs.

Do some real thinking and planning about the job, your relationships with business leaders, and your hopes for publicity and prestige. The 7th to 12th brings some excellent ideas, that you should study, put on a realistic basis and apply in practice.

Ask no favors of anyone at all the 13th to 17th. Others are not receptive to your wishes, you will have to work things out on your own.

Take no risks whatever with assets, funds and reserves the 15th to the end of the month. Some trouble is in prospect, and this could very easily result in financial loss.

The first half of the month may be a bit quiet socially, but the last half is better in this respect. Accept invitations, but keep your own parties limited to those you know well. Do not invite business friends the 15th to 21st.

LIBRA

IF YOUR BIRTHDAY Comes Between SEPTEMBER 23 and OCTOBER 23

Health trends continue to be rather adverse the 1st to around the 22nd of March. Take care of your physical condition. Avoid any sort of strain or extra effort that would reduce the vitality below par. This is a bad time of the year in any case, and when there is added to this an increased susceptibility you would be wise to take no chances.

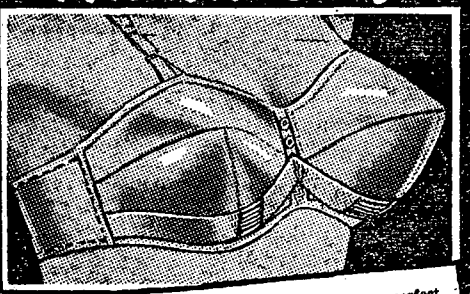
Also, the 15th to 25th is a little accidental. Do not be careless when near machinery, watch the footing with ladders, rugs and steps, and stay well clear of strange or unfriendly animals.

Write special personal letters to dear friends the 7th to 12th. Now is the time to draw closer together, to achieve that sympathy that is the basis of true affection.

The 13th to 17th brings a tendency to worry. Whatever the problem that upsets you, this is no time to try and settle it. Unless it is of immediate importance, put it off for a time.

Except for the 15th to 20th, turn your attention to the home this month. A good time for spending for major repairs, additions, furniture, redecorating, and special equipment to help make your work easier.

FIGURE LOSING FIRMNESS?



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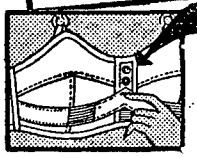

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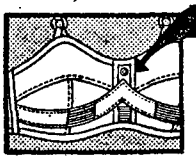
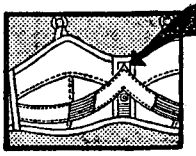


FOR EXTRA UPLIFT

The second adjustment is for the lady whose bust has lost its youthful firmness. It restores the natural-beauty line that you thought you could never regain.



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SCORPIO

IF YOUR BIRTHDAY Comes Between OCTOBER 24 and NOVEMBER 22

March can be a very exciting month in some ways, the result of a powerful social and personal stimulus. You should have the chance to enjoy yourself in a wide variety of ways.

Be tactful with friends the 2nd to 6th. Their feelings may be hurt, perhaps by something you say or do, and this may lead to a temporary break.

The 13th to the end of the month is even more active. A lot of new acquaintances can come into your sphere. Some of these can be most interesting and attractive, but handle meetings with discretion or you may find yourself in the position of having to choose between a new friend and an old one.

You may consider special spending for luxuries and personal wants the 7th to 12th. You will know just what it is you want, and where and how to get it, but you may be wise to limit spending to the money you have on hand.

The young can be a source of some worry the 10th to 18th. If some upset presents itself, do not try to settle things on the spur of the moment. Take plenty of time to readjust matters to their satisfaction and benefit.

Where purely business conditions are concerned, you have good judgment all month. This is a time to leave radical moves alone, but to concentrate on a slow and steady progress toward the goal you have before you. Think your plans through to the finish.

SAGITTARIUS

IF YOUR BIRTHDAY Comes Between NOVEMBER 23 and DECEMBER 21

It may be wise to limit personal ambitions in the external world for most of March. The public is much less responsive to you, less willing to yield their friendship.

If you do have any such responsibilities that you cannot put aside, do what you can the 7th to 12th, and the last ten days of the month. On the whole, however, conserve your major hopes and plans until later.

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ROMANCE IN YOUR STARS

The 1st to 6th is dull and disappointing in the home sphere. A very poor time for giving a party, inviting guests.

There is excellent mutual judgment between you and partner the 7th to 12th. The best possible time for you both to decide family and home questions.

The 13th to 17th is not the best time for signing contracts or other legal documents. Read everything you sign very thoroughly.

Be most receptive to new friendships the 18th to the end of the month. There is an added magnetism drawing friends your way, some of whom can be attractive and stimulating to you.

CAPRICORN

IF YOUR BIRTHDAY Comes Between DECEMBER 22 and JANUARY 19

Many forces, some good and some adverse, are operating in the field of the mind and mental expression throughout March.

The mind is strong, active and expressive the 1st to 22nd. You can make a powerful impression, but at the same time watch that you do not say too much, or speak on the spur of the moment. This could get you entangled in arguments and conflicts, and these would not be helpful.

Limit correspondence the 13th to 17th. Be extra careful with home and family decisions the last ten days.

Trips the 1st to 15th could turn out to be adverse to the health. Do not go away in bad weather, unless a trip is absolutely imperative.

Turn your attention to finances the 1st to 15th. The judgment is excellent here. While you need not hurry to act, you can arrange plans to be put into effect the moment you see the opportunity to do so.

There may be a tendency to worry about health this month, a very bad thing to do. Mere worry can sometimes attract a disorder.

AQUARIUS

IF YOUR BIRTHDAY Comes Between JANUARY 20 and FEBRUARY 18

There is the prospect of some waste or loss of money the first week of March. This

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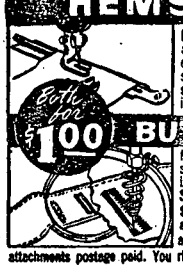

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could come through carelessness or theft. A poor time for buying hats, shoes or clothing. Do not lend money to friends.

Some excellent social ideas come to mind the 5th to 12th. If you want to expand your social connections now is the time.

The 13th to 17th is bad for signing money documents of any kind. If circumstances make it necessary to sign, use caution, keep your wits about you so you do not make a mistake.

Keep a close watch on property and investments the 15th to 25th. Some trouble can arise from almost any source. Do not allow others to obtain control of your assets. Have some extra cash on hand for contingencies. Be well insured.

Personal life becomes more active and interesting the 20th on. External conditions appear to brighten. This is a time to start something new.

PISCES

IF YOUR BIRTHDAY Comes Between FEBRUARY 19 and MARCH 20

The 1st to 20th of March is most active, in terms of your practical interests. There is added energy and enthusiasm, qualities that you can use to make the general pattern of your life more progressive. Be ready to take action wherever you consider it advisable. If you want results, now is the time to go after them.

If you do anything new, original and progressive, pause from the 21st on and take stock of what you have done. Organize your accomplishments on the new basis. The 1st to 20th is excellent for starting a new job.

Make some home changes the 6th to 12th. Some rearranging will help to make the home more interesting and colorful. Invite some friends for a talk or a party.

Defer talks with partner on important questions the 13th to 17th. It would be harder to agree, and even where you do you could make a mistake. Put off major decisions for the time being.

Finances are progressive the 21st to the end of the month. Turn your energies to the consideration of more income and how to go about getting it. At this time you will be well aware that intelligently applied vigor can overcome obstacles, sweep troubles out of the way.

Buy with discretion the 22nd to 25th, especially luxury goods for the home.

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TELL ME YOUR TROUBLES

Continued from page 75)

tears were running down her small, twisted face. She said hysterically, "Get out. You get out of here, Ted Barron. I hate you, hate you, hate you!"

He hardly heard her words, but was still too shaken with the force of the new emotion that had gone through him during that kiss. He stared at her almost stupidly. Then he stammered, "But I—I'm in love with you, Marian. I just realized it now." He caught his breath. "I guess I've been in love with you all along, without knowing it."

She stared back at him, blank shock in her eyes. Finally she whispered, "In love with me? But what about Lois?"

Ted laughed. "I guess that was just one of those infatuations that you read about. Beside you, Lois just doesn't stack up. Kissing her tonight, after kissing you—oh, brother, what a let-down."

Then he sobered suddenly. Gosh, what was he getting so excited about? Marian was mad at him, she didn't want him around. They'd had three fights in two days. Ted bit his lip. Then he said humbly, "Do you think you could forgive me, too, given time, Marian?"

Then, abruptly, she started to laugh. She said, her voice oddly tender, "You big goop, I've been crazy about you for months. Only I couldn't very well propose to you; it isn't done. So I've taken you any way I could get you, though it's been tough pulling the sweet-sister line, and listening to you rave about Lois Porter. That's why I blew up last night, I just couldn't stand hearing about her any more. And I'd completely given up hope of your ever noticing me in a romantic way."

He reached out and pulled Marian into his arms again. He said masterfully, "Seems like it's time I kissed you when I wasn't mad at you."

He discovered that kisses of love were a lot more fun than kisses of anger!

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TO WRITE TO A PAL—Select someone who interests you and write your letter, signing your own name and address so the reply will come direct to you. Put this into a STAMPED ENVELOPE, but DO NOT SEAL THIS ENVELOPE. On the corner of this envelope write the number of the Pal to whom you wish it forwarded. Put this envelope and your letter in another envelope, and address this one to Polly Porter, Love Book Magazine, 205 East 42nd St., New York City 17. You may write several Pals if you wish but be sure to enclose a stamped envelope for each.

Notify Polly Porter at once of any change of address giving your name, NUMBER, old and new address.

7569 HUNTER

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7570 LIVES IN MAINE WILDS

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Cory

7571 SIX FEET

This potential pen pal is nineteen, six feet tall and has blue hair and brown eyes and is a member of the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve. Like movies and enjoy good music, work in a camera shop.

Stretch

7572 WANTS FRIENDS

I am lonely and have no social outlet where I can meet men my age, it just doesn't happen through churches anymore. They don't even pretend to innoculate any social interest for we "old ones". How about it pals?

Cleo

7573 ARTIST

I am a commercial artist, age twenty-three, black hair, gray eyes. It gets lonesome at times and would like to hear from models or anyone. My pastimes are hiking, swimming, dancing.

Lewis

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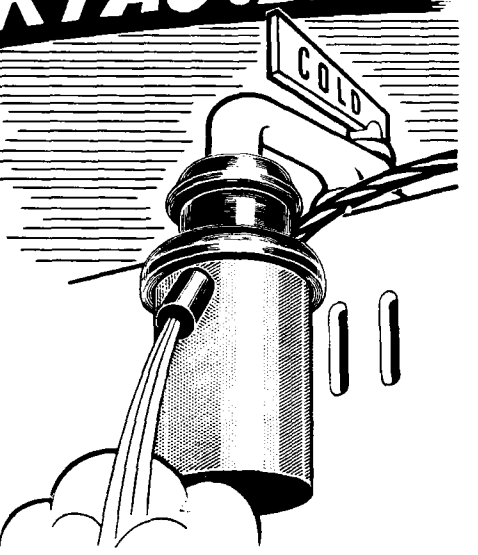

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